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New survey illustrates challenges and opportunities for assessments

Many higher ed leaders say their institutions struggle to reliably measure and demonstrate student learning outcomes

University Business (UB) and ExamSoft partnered to develop and deploy a survey of higher education leaders in the UB audience, exploring the challenges of measuring and assessing student learning outcomes at their institutions. Some 386 college and university leaders from around the country responded and participated in the survey.

Measuring learning outcomes overall

The first question asked respondents if their institution’s leadership has been under more pressure in the last 3-5 years to find ways to reliably measure and demonstrate student learning outcomes overall. By far, the leading answer selected was “Yes, definitely” at 53%, while another 40% said “Yes, somewhat.” Just 6% said “Very little” and 1% said “Not at all.”

Those respondents who answered yes were then asked if it is a challenge for their institution to reliably measure and demonstrate student learning outcomes overall. Some 57% said this was a “Moderate” challenge while another 29% described this as a “Significant challenge” for their institution. Just 14% said this was not a challenge.

Would you say that your institution’s leadership has been under more pressure in the last 3-5 years to find ways to reliably measure and demonstrate student learning outcomes overall?

Is it a challenge for your institution to measure and demonstrate student learning outcomes?
Centralization of assessment

Respondents were then asked to describe how centralized the assessment or exam process was at their institution. While the leading answer was “Each course or professor can use their own assessment/exam platform or system” (41%), significant percentages also selected “Each department, school or college can use their own” (29%) and “We use one central platform for most, or all, of the institution” (30%).

As a follow up, the next question asked if it would be helpful to have one central platform for assessment or exams across all or most programs and departments at their institution. Some 46% said this would be helpful, with 19% saying “Definitely.”

When asked if it was challenging for their institution to gather and measure evidence of academic quality and student learning specifically for accreditation purposes across all programs, 16% said “Significantly” and 65% described it as “Moderately challenging,” for a total of 81% saying this was challenging. Just 19% said this was “Easy” for their institution.

Similarly, respondents were asked if it was challenging for their institution to identify students who are struggling academically in courses, prior to final exams. A majority, or 54%, said this was challenging.

The next question then asked respondents how confident they were that their institution could provide struggling students with the resources they need to help them succeed and persist to graduation or completion. The vast majority—or 64%—said they were only “Somewhat confident,” while another 12% said they had a “Low level of confidence” and 3% were “Not confident at all.”

81% of respondents said it was challenging for their institution to gather and measure evidence of academic quality and student learning for accreditation purposes.

54% said it was challenging for their institution to identify students who are struggling academically.

46% said it would be helpful to have one central platform or system for assessment or exams used across all or most departments and programs.

“This survey illustrates the fact that while many institutions are under pressure to measure and demonstrate student learning outcomes, the capability to deliver on this consistently can be challenging,” says Britt Nichols from ExamSoft. “At the same time, many respondents acknowledged that it would be helpful to have a central platform used for assessment across the institution, which is indicative of why we are seeing many universities adopt ExamSoft’s digital assessment platform to provide that solution.”

ExamSoft provides higher education institutions with the comprehensive assessment platform needed to administer exams more efficiently, gain unprecedented insight into student learning, and prevent academic dishonesty with unparalleled exam security features.

To learn more, go to ExamSoft.com/higher-education
Tackling today’s pressing issues

This first edition of 2021 focuses on a few key challenges facing universities. I hope you find some insights and ideas.

With Black and Hispanic Wisconsin high school students experiencing major achievement gaps, two public universities, a private institution and a community college have partnered on a “Moon Shot for Equity.” Learn how they plan to work with high schools and community organizations to make college more attainable for these students. Page 6

While the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines has begun, we’re far from getting the virus under control. Which is why monitoring and reporting infection numbers is vital for a university to help its community. We look at the work a team of university leaders is doing to highlight effective COVID dashboards and help those that have poor - or nonexistent - dashboards improve theirs. Page 10

Anxiety and stress over the pandemic have caused faculty morale to plummet. The economic impacts on higher ed alone have many struggling with uncertainty about their employment. We dive into ways that universities can raise morale and boost engagement for everyone’s benefit. Page 14

I look forward to working with you this year. If you have feedback or ideas, my inbox is always open – eweiss@lrp.com

—Eric Weiss, executive editor

Reasons to visit UniversityBusiness.com

4 universities enjoy application surge

Several highly selective schools report that admissions applications have soared to record numbers

bit.ly/3coap5E

SAT simplified: Here’s how

3 big changes: Essay and subject tests have been eliminated; exams become more flexible

bit.ly/2NHDbnb

Biden orders reopening plan

Colleges and universities will receive “evidence-based guidance” to safely reopen campuses.

bit.ly/36odyOM

Preparing for a ‘demographic pothole’

High school graduates expected to peak at 4 million in 2025 before beginning a steady decline

bit.ly/36qaMsn
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LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

Critical capacity: COVID-19 and the future of educator preparation programs

Teacher candidates whose clinical practices were interrupted by the pandemic must be able to develop the skills they need to meet licensure and certification requirements.

By Kathleen DaBoll-Lavoie

As we enter the new year, many education leaders are questioning the impact of the pandemic on educator preparation programs (EPPs) and the pipeline of new teachers entering classrooms in 2021 and beyond.

Will colleges and universities expand and invest in their education programs to meet the demand for new teachers as educators retire due to COVID-19 health concerns? Will they downsize their education programs due to budget cuts resulting from the pandemic? Will they find innovative ways to collaborate with other institutions to sustain their education programs?

While there are many uncertainties, what we do know is that if educational programs are scaled back or terminated, the national teacher shortage will be exacerbated.

Scope of the problem

Recently, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) released the Issue Brief, Institutions Offering Degrees in Education. The report provides institutions with information against which to benchmark their own experience.

While the data show that the number of institutions awarding degrees in education has been relatively stable between 2009-10 to 2018-19, the number of EPPs awarding very few degrees had grown significantly and accounted for one-third of all programs by 2019. Further enrollment losses and financial strains due to the pandemic may force institutions to close small educator preparation programs, resulting in a permanent loss of capacity to meet the nation’s need for profession-ready new teachers.

If educational programs for teachers are scaled back or terminated, the national teacher shortage will be exacerbated.

EPPs play a vital role in the educational ecosystem by providing PK-12 schools with qualified educators. If institutions discontinue their education programs, or are unable to recruit students into their programs, the devastating effects will be felt at the national, state and district levels.

While EPPs struggle with the teacher shortage and fiscal crisis brought on by COVID-19, it is critical that our educational system moves forward in preserving teacher preparation and supporting teacher candidates as they move from clinical practice into the classroom. Teacher candidates are invaluable assets, not only to the future of our educational system, but also in supporting school districts as student teachers.

Actions to take

We need to create additional, collaborative opportunities between EPPs, states, and school districts that allow teacher candidates whose clinical practice was interrupted by the pandemic to develop the skills they need to meet licensure and certification requirements.

For example, through a mentoring program, EPPs and school districts can match teacher candidates with a veteran teacher, allowing candidates the opportunity to practice their pedagogical content knowledge while simultaneously offering mentoring teachers help with the challenges of teaching during a pandemic.

The AACTE report recommends state and/or federal support to institutions that would enable them to sustain their education programs during the pandemic and its immediate aftermath, especially if the institution can demonstrate a viable plan for reinvigorating its education program.

While the warning bells are ringing, there are potential, positive outcomes from the pandemic on our educational system.

Remote learning has brought about a renewed appreciation for the teaching profession, as parents are seeing firsthand the important role educators play in their children’s lives. Parents can significantly influence their children’s career decisions, and their positive outlook on the teaching profession can lead to a larger pool of students entering education. While the pandemic’s effects on our educational system remain unpredictable, we must proactively move forward to sustain capacity for educator preparation.

ABOUT KATHLEEN DABOLL-LAVOIE:

Dean of the School of Education at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York, since 2016 and a professor there since 1991, Kathleen DaBoll-Lavoie is also a member of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) Board of Directors. In addition, she is chair of the AACTE Advisory Council of State Representatives. DaBoll-Lavoie is the past co-chair of the New York State Professional Standards and Practices Board and past president of the New York Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.
STUDENT SUCCESS

7 ways to reach at-risk college students

Research from North Carolina State and Clemson show the disparities among various groups around mental health impacts during the pandemic and how institutions can help.

Which college students are being most impacted by the pandemic? A study conducted by researchers at North Carolina State and Clemson universities shows both the effects and risk factors coronavirus is having on the mental health of student populations across the country.

The report, which was published in the journal PLOS ONE, notes that 85% of the more than 2,000 students surveyed across seven university campuses experienced high levels of psychological distress or felt moderately impacted by it during the first months of the pandemic.

“The pandemic is problematic for everyone, and we know that it’s especially problematic for students who are eager to experience the unique social atmosphere that college life has to offer,” said co-author Lincoln Larson, associate professor of parks, recreation and tourism management at North Carolina State University. “COVID-19 has thrown a wrench into all of that. Our study found the pandemic is clearly taking a significant psychological toll on students.”

Women have been among the groups affected most by thoughts of COVID-19, say researchers, along with Asian students. Students from lower-income backgrounds, those in poorer health and those who had contact with someone who had contracted the virus were also said to be in the high-risk group. Authors said those in the 18-24 age range were experiencing moderate stress, while those in older groups were experiencing less.

The psychological toll was being manifested in a variety of ways—lack of motivation, difficulty concentrating, anxiety, stress and feelings of isolation.

Authors said the results of the study mirrored those done in the U.S., China and Switzerland over the past year.

Addressing the issues

Matthew Browning, assistant professor and Director of Clemson’s Virtual Reality and Nature Lab, and other co-authors noted the dire aftershocks that have come since the pandemic hit—the “1,000% increase” in the calls to mental health hotlines, the rise in suicides and the substance abuse of those who had relapsed or turned to drug and alcohol for escape. “Nearly half of college students were at a severe handicap in terms of their quality of life, education and social relationships because of their mental health during the early stages of the pandemic,” Browning said.

Two of the risk factors that he and others highlighted were increased screen time (eight-plus hours a day was associated with high stress) and the lack of outdoor time for students (but at least two hours a day helped mitigate the stress levels). The authors have seven recommendations for higher ed leaders:

1. Get outdoors—“green time vs. screen time.” Many institutions turned to outdoor spaces for a variety of activities, including some classes, during last spring and summer and should continue to explore those options for spring.

2. Be transparent with students about cases, numbers and risks. Those who know real-time statistics are less likely to experience the highest stress levels. Dashboards and social media updates are the best ways to reach various groups.

3. Promote campus mental health initiatives. Researchers note the success that University of Kentucky, Northeastern University and University of Connecticut have had in launching programs around exercise and wellness that have lowered stress and boosted engagement.

4. Improve your reach. Offer forums for discussion, send text and email messages, and pepper social media with positive messages. Promote campus programs across multiple channels.

5. Focus on the positive. Allay fears while offering programming and outreach that gets students to find “silver linings.” Adjust the mindsets of students to “stress-related growth” and “toughening” rather than one of weakness.

6. Create spaces for students to connect. Institutions can offer podcasts, virtual movies and trivia nights.

7. Don’t discount remote learning. Though it is the goal to have students back in face-to-face environments, some might not feel comfortable with it, and it may just not be safe. Offering a blend of learning options can ease some of the stress of those concerned about contracting the virus. —Chris Burt
Black high school students in Wisconsin experience the largest achievement gap in the nation, and their Hispanic classmates are almost as far behind.

That's why two public universities, a private institution and a community college have banded together on a “Moon Shot for Equity” attempt to close those gaps.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, Milwaukee Area Technical College and Carthage College will begin to implement strategies that have proven to remove systemic barriers to student success at other higher ed institutions.

All faculty and staff at these four institutions will also be trained in equity-mindedness.

The partners make up the first consortium of institutions to commit to education firm EAB’s national Moon Shot for Equity initiative.

“Wisconsin is dead last in the country in the high school equity gap for Black students, and in the bottom seven of all 50 states for Hispanic students,” says UW-Milwaukee Chancellor Mark Mone. “These gaps continue into higher education, and we find this unacceptable.”

The four institutions will work with local high schools and community organizations to guide more underserved students toward college.

U-W Milwaukee will launch its ‘moon shot’ with equity-mindedness training for staff and faculty and climate assessments, Vice Provost Phyllis King says.

“Higher education has, in some ways, looked at students who are lower on the performance scale with a deficit mindset,” King says. “What we intend to do with this initiative is really look at the institutional barriers our students face.”

Making math more relevant
The Moon Shot for Equity will change the way math is taught and the way students are advised. There will also be shifts in student success work at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside.

Nearly 40% of the students at U-W Parkside identify as students of color, while the university has the largest population of first-generation students in the state system.

The university is considering NOT requiring all students to take college algebra, Provost Rob Ducoffe says.

“College algebra is really only relevant for students going into STEM fields,” Ducoffe says. “We want to offer more relevant math courses for each students’ academic career track because the data show students do much better in math courses that are relevant to their majors.”

The university also plans to change its developmental courses for students who aren’t considered to be ready for college math. New co-requisite courses will let students earn credits while they get extra

ACCELERATING EQUITY — A new credit-momentum strategy encourages students at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside to take more courses each semester.
efforts are raising retention and graduation rates, President John Swallow says. As part of this work, Carthage College has shifted its existing anti-racism initiatives into high gear this summer, coinciding with the killing of George Floyd, the death of a Black man at the hands of Minneapolis police. The killings have shifted the conversation around racism in the U.S., and Carthage administrators want to embed anti-racism across the curriculum. For instance, economics classes can study redlining policies in the Milwaukee area. "When I think about my own education there was a lot I learned that wasn’t true, like why the Civil War happened, and that’s just the tip of the iceberg," Swallow says.

"We have asked Carthage faculty to consider requiring students to take at least one course that analyzes the legacy of racism in the U.S., and embed anti-racism across the curriculum. For instance, economics classes could study redlining policies in the Milwaukee area."

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Carthage administrators will also look at operations, such as how the college is communicating with students. For instance, in the past, student accounts might send only emails to students. But those communications will likely expand to text, phone calls and other modes to accommodate students who might be working multiple jobs or have other responsibilities beyond their academic pursuits.

Administrators will consider reconfiguring course schedules to give students more flexibility, too.

"We’re going to rebalance all the things we’re doing in light of the fact that there is no one typical student," Swallow says. "It’s that idea of one typical student that holds us back over and over."

"We can’t wait’ on equity" Milwaukee Area Technical College has become majority-minority over the last few years even as its hometown has some of the highest incarceration rates for Black men and the widest income gaps.

These divides also persist in healthcare, homeownership and job opportunities, says Vicki J. Martin, the college’s president. "It’s not just about access, it’s also about retention and completion. We have to understand the role of race and identity, and the role of equity in the past and what that means for the future of higher education."

The college’s Moon Shot will work with equity training for staff and faculty and climate assessments.

"We need to do things differently in admissions, we need to do things differently in the onboarding process," Martin says. "We have to use not just a single high-stakes test to determine where to place students—we need to use multiple measures."

In the last case, the college will give more weight to high school grades, grades from other colleges and ACT scores to better identify the courses and supports students need.

Supports and course schedules will also have to become more flexible because 90% of students attend part-time due to work commitments.

A key part of the Moon Shot initiative will be recruiting more diverse faculty and staff as well. "Students need to see success—the place they can begin to see that is in the classroom with their own instructors," Martin says.

The four Moon Shot schools will be guided by national mentors Houston GPS and Georgia State University, both of which have done pioneering work in closing equity gaps.

The four institutions will also work with EAB to track data, implement technology and develop new solutions. Sharing data and ideas will allow new strategies to be scaled regionally and nationally, Martin says.

"We can’t wait," she adds. "We need to do everything possible to make our institution a place where students of color can succeed at the same rate as their white counterparts."

Matt Zalaznick is UB’s senior writer.
Leading in a changing world: Rowan University transforms itself and its future

Q&A with Ali A. Houshmand, President, Rowan University

Rowan University, a public research university in Glassboro, New Jersey, is a national model for institutional transformation, recently named the fourth-fastest growing public institution in the nation two years running. Driven by bold and creative initiatives and partnerships, it boasts enrollment that nearly doubled from 2008 to 2020, to more than 19,700 students. In that time, Rowan opened a medical school (the first in N.J. in 35 years), integrated a second and partnered in a $426 million downtown development project that revitalized its campus and community. Rowan has $1.2 billion in facilities recently completed, under construction or in design and planning. Dr. Ali A. Houshmand has served as president of Rowan University since 2012.

What was your strategy for driving this impressive enrollment growth?

I firmly believed that in order to grow, we needed to improve simultaneously in these four areas: access, affordability, quality and economic impact. You cannot sustain growth at the expense of quality. By focusing on each of these four areas at the same time, we were eventually freed from the dependence on state funding and tuition and fee increases. We decided we weren’t going to balance our budget based on those funding sources. We committed to keeping tuition and fee increases to at or below the rate of inflation.

New Jersey has the highest-density population in the nation. Here in southern New Jersey, the demand far outweighs the supply for seats at colleges and universities. There are only four institutions in this area, not nearly enough for the number of high school graduates, so about 30 percent of them go to college in other states. That presented an opportunity for rapid growth if we did the right things.

By reducing costs and creating public-private partnerships, we were able to go from deficits to a budget surplus. We used those funds to hire more top-notch faculty, build our research capacity, improve campus facilities and increase our marketing budget, helping us earn national recognition and the confidence of private, corporate and foundation investors who share our vision. More students and their parents saw Rowan as a new option, and for many, we became their first choice.

“I firmly believed that in order to grow, we needed to improve simultaneously in these four areas: access, affordability, quality and economic impact. You cannot sustain growth at the expense of quality.”

To learn more, visit www.Rowan.edu
How has Rowan worked to maintain affordability for students, and keep costs down for the institution?

When it came to costs, we adopted the philosophy that every nonacademic department of the university should be looked at as a business and should be managed using business principles to make them as efficient as possible.

After 10 years of discipline, we have gone from budget deficits to a substantial surplus. We then reinvested those savings back into the university, supporting scholarships, making campus and facilities improvements, adding and improving academic programs and supporting our medical schools. We were able to hire the best faculty from all over the country and invested heavily in applied research with private and public entities, which provides students with growth opportunities while in school, as well as stronger prospects for employment upon graduation.

As an economic engine for the region, we start by providing high-quality resources and services to students. With a better bottom line for our core mission of education, we can create opportunities for others to benefit from our strengths in innovation and efficiency.

What role have public-private partnerships played in your growth and success?

These partnerships were crucial to our new construction and infrastructure projects. For example, by using private investments to build our new dorms on land owned by the borough rather than our university, we set up a revenue sharing agreement with the investors where we made more revenue than if we had borrowed the funds, and the facilities are higher quality.

Rowan Boulevard, our major downtown development project, was built on land owned by the borough of Glassboro and was also built through public-private partnerships. It expanded our footprint, but also greatly benefited the community with jobs and business development. This was an area that used to generate $110,000 annually in tax revenue, that now generates over $5 million. Higher education institutions can truly be engines of economic development in their communities.

Rowan created a formal partnership with two local community colleges, which are now renamed Rowan College of South Jersey and Rowan College of Burlington County. What inspired those partnerships?

It might seem counterintuitive at first to partner with community colleges. Some see it as “giving away” your enrollment to have students attend their first two years there, but I don’t see it that way. The more people we help to educate, the more we are doing our job as a state institution.

By getting as many introductory courses as possible taught at the community college level, that significantly reduces tuition costs and student debt overall. That in turn results in higher retention and completion and graduation rates. It also means that our faculty can focus on teaching higher-level courses. That effectively doubles the capacity of the institution in terms of instructors. In addition, it creates a funnel system, where these community colleges feed students directly into our university. That’s a stable source of enrollment during a very volatile time.

In 2018 Rowan officially became an R2 research institution. How have you prioritized research to earn this designation?

We invested heavily in research and faculty. Our board committed to investing $50 million over 10 years in seed funding, which supports initial research to help secure grant funding. We have been able to hire faculty who are much more qualified and dedicated to research than in the past, we added new Ph.D. programs, and we built many new research facilities, including doubling the size of our engineering and business buildings. By partnering with a regional health care system and securing funding from the state, we helped build a new $500 million research hospital. We put research at the forefront.

What are your plans for the future?

I can sum up my strategic plan in one sentence: make Rowan University a proactive institution, rather than a reactive one. When I became president, our research, fundraising and continuing education revenue combined was less than $10 million annually. Today it is $120 million annually. Our plan is to continue this trajectory; significantly growing fundraising, investing aggressively in research so that we become an R1 research institution, and continuing to grow through partnerships or acquiring other institutions. We intend to move into online programs in a massive way.

Our strategy is a cycle, where we grow revenue, then reinvest those funds to increase the quality and prestige of the university, which grows revenue further. We’re going to continue in this direction. The future is bright!
COVID dashboards:

How does your institution’s COVID-19 dashboard stack up?

If it made it onto the website We Rate Covid Dashboards (ratecoviddashboard.com), that’s a start. Launched and maintained by professors and student leaders from Yale, Harvard, Rice and Ohio State universities, it ranks colleges and universities on how informative and easy-to-navigate they have been in displaying pandemic information to their communities.

The portal also offers an opportunity for colleges that have dashboards—and those that don’t—to share ideas and data with others across higher education. Though each institution is ranked on its site’s thoroughness, the takeaway most leaders get from scrolling through it is how they can improve their own dashboards.

Dr. Cary Gross, Professor of Medicine and Public Health at the Yale School of Medicine, says the importance of the information cannot be undersold. “Colleges exist to educate to generate and share knowledge,” Gross said during the recent webinar “Colleges, COVID-19 Dashboards & Transparency: Practical Approaches to Prepare for 2021.” “Transparency is a fundamental mission of colleges when it comes to their behavior during the pandemic. There’s no playbook. So, colleges were doing their best to collect data. We thought it would be helpful to work collaboratively with stakeholders to put together a list of criteria that could be used by colleges to evaluate the dashboard efforts.”

Ratings cover nine categories—from the simple “easy to read” and “updated daily” to more robust “frequency of testing” and “city/county data.” Colleges that can tick off all boxes, including their own “student/staff results” and “quarantine/isolation” information are given points toward an overall grade.

Two of the best have been Wagner College in New York and Amherst College in Massachusetts, which have received A++ ratings and scores of 13 out of 13. But it’s also just as important, experts point out, to highlight the ones that

Does yours make the grade?

A team of university leaders is giving out grades for pandemic data sites and also urging institutions to share information to help their communities across the U.S.

By Chris Burt
didn’t receive perfect scores. For example, Northern Arizona received a very good B score but not an A because of its lack of city/county data to compare with what is happening on campus, as well as a lack of quarantine/isolation data.

Campus officials who can see weaknesses in their dashboards along with those that appear on others ultimately can improve the information they send to their constituents, said Gross.

“We’ve really been blown away by the collaboration from people who have reached out to us,” Gross said. “People have really been warm and receptive, collaborative and sharing.”

As of mid-January, nearly 350 colleges and universities had openly shared their data on the site.

Starting up a dashboard

Dr. Lindsey Mortenson, a board-certified physician and director of University Health Services (UHS) at the University of Michigan, said putting together its dashboard was “a little bit like trying to assemble a car while it’s rolling downhill ... and under the microscope of students, faculty, staff and alumni all over the world.”

Michigan began like most institutions, with an Excel spreadsheet tracking cases on campus and reporting them to internal stakeholders. It became clear that beyond getting testing ramped up, Michigan needed to get others involved (UHS and Occupational Health Services) and include other data from the county and state to show comparisons to what was happening on campus.

After officials compiled the numbers and launched the dashboard, Mortenson said “there were all kinds of reactions, ranging from: this is amazing, we love it to, oh my gosh, this is terrible. Why don’t you have X, Y and Z?.”

So, Michigan upped the ante, creating “a small army of people” to help in the dashboard effort, including its School of Information, School of Public Health and Michigan Medicine.

“It feels very much like a county health department,” Mortenson said.
The dashboard was super critical for how we evolved our COVID efforts.”

At Grinnell College in Iowa, the dashboard has been a key tool for the institution and the surrounding county, which has less than 20,000 residents.

It is the dashboard for the county and the region, so it serves a purpose beyond the college, said Dr. Eli Perencevich, an advisor to the college who is also an infectious disease physician, epidemiologist and professor at the University of Iowa’s Carver College of Medicine. “The town does have an 80-bed hospital that can become very overwhelmed quickly. We wanted to have the regional data so that we can make informed decisions about opening up based on hospital availability.”

The mayor, superintendents and hospital leaders are all using Grinnell’s dashboard to make decisions about local school reopenings.

Having that county information “reinforces that colleges don’t exist in bubbles. Infection can go both ways, from students into the surrounding community and vice-versa. If you’re making decisions, you really have to incorporate both into the decision-making process.”

During dashboard development, Grinnell officials began adding categories such as weekly number of tests and test positivity rate. They opted to include information on whether there were mask mandates, too (because many rural areas didn’t have them).

For Mortenson and her team—which got a boost from having the help of epidemiologist and Governor Task Force member Dr. Emily Martin on board—the release of the dashboard provided a gut check to the data they were delivering. Though it included key items such as 7-day onset of cases, students and parents were clamoring for more—cases in residence halls, quarantine and isolation numbers, and occupancy in buildings, for example.

“[Occupancy] was something people were really watching,” she said, adding, “I think that there was a much broader conversation with more voices at the table because that data was public and transparent.”

Having that county information “reinforces that colleges don’t exist in bubbles. Infection can go both ways, from students into the surrounding community and vice-versa. If you’re making decisions, you really have to incorporate both into the decision-making process.”

Working toward a better dashboard

Eric Mayberry, a data analytics leader at The Ohio State University and part of the We Rate Covid Dashboards site’s

1. How well are the categories labeled?
2. When was the last time the data was updated? (Daily? Weekly?)
3. Does it contain county- or city-level data?
4. Does it note how often people are getting tested?
5. Is test turnaround time explained?
6. Does it specify how many students are in isolation and in quarantine?
team of volunteers, said it’s important for colleges and universities to include as much information as possible while keeping it easy to read.

“Show as much as you can about the data,” he said. “We don’t want to adversely affect the community. We want parents and students to know that universities are doing the best we can to keep this in check. If you don’t have a dashboard, it’s never too late to start. It doesn’t need to be anything fancy.”

Site traffic should be a consideration. Ohio State has had as many as 50,000 visits to its Safe and Healthy Buckeyes Dashboard in one day, when normal traffic to the university site would be around 2,500, Mayberry said.

Patrick Hansen, the founder of novéInsights, which works with institutions to help provide resources and help in their dashboard efforts, said the more visually appealing and easy to navigate, the better informed those who visit will be.

His company offers step-by-step instructions along with embed codes, as well as links to other free workbooks and accessibility resources, to help take a simple dashboard and make it more informative. He says colleges and universities eventually can add whatever categories they want—faculty vs. staff cases or athletes—to build up a dashboard.

Once launched, Mayberry and Gross caution that it is important that COVID data be checked frequently, especially if testing is going through third parties off campus. And it’s a good idea to note that even when tests come back positive, some may have elicited false positives.

**Envisioning additional uses**

Although many dashboards for COVID are now well-established, there are potential new applications for them on the immediate horizon—namely vaccines. Should colleges try to launch their own vaccine dashboards or incorporate that into COVID dashboards? That is something to consider because that information will be just as vital as test and positivity rates.

“I’m excited to see how dashboards are going to evolve,” Mortenson said. “I’m already seeing some states put up dashboards about vaccination. There’s a lot of interest in reporting out on which vaccines people are getting, what percentage of people are getting a second dose and what happens to transmission and positivity rates.”

There could be additional uses for dashboards, too, said Perencevich—using them to track other health issues, renewable energy, food waste or even wait times for Student Health Services.

Chris Burt is UB’s associate editor.
Campus leaders can’t wait until faculty morale is tanking to add it to the list of priorities.

Keeping instructors engaged requires a proactive approach that includes giving faculty a meaningful role in decision-making as well as building pride in academic departments and institutions, says Edward Hebert, a professor of kinesiology at Southeastern Louisiana University who has studied morale.

"Once morale is bad, it’s really hard to turn the ship around," Hebert says. "Morale is not something that’s easy to manipulate—you might think, I’ll just pay people more money but that’s not it either."

COVID, of course, has put even more stress on faculty, as they contend with the twin challenges of overhauling teaching techniques while helping students cope with trauma and anxiety. But, Hebert says, the key components to raising morale remain the same:

• Sustaining a strong sense of collegiality on campus
• Providing chances for faculty to work together on meaningful initiatives
• Allowing more experienced faculty to mentor younger instructors
• Publicizing a department’s or program’s success

"When a student comes into office hours, faculty members don’t know if they’re going to talk about subject matter or if they’re going to have to put on their grief counselor or therapist hat."

Facing the future

The economic crisis caused by COVID has many faculty members worried about the health of their institutions and potential consolidations, furloughs and layoffs.

In Pennsylvania, a faculty association has been lobbying state officials to provide more certainty and stability, says Jamie Martin, president of the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties.

At the beginning of the fall semester, the state system had warned of layoffs at 10 universities. The faculty association has pressured officials to lower that to number to only five schools, says Martin, also a professor of criminology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Her organization is closely moni-
toring a plan to consolidate two groups of the state system’s universities.

“Faculty are isolated from their students and isolated from colleagues who can provide moral support from, and they’re facing all issues like losing jobs and health care in the middle of a pandemic,” Martin says.

Administrators can help faculty by providing as much information and clarity as possible.

For example, faculty appreciated when administrators at some state campuses announced the entire fall 2020 semester would take place online, rather than struggling to conduct in-person classes and then having to switch to remote.

“My colleagues at those universities breathed a palpable sigh of relief because they knew in advance how they had to design classes,” she said. “That was extremely helpful.”

Reflect on what’s missing
Morale is not the sole responsibility of administrators. There are plenty of actions faculty can take to reduce stress on their own.

Professors should eliminate any assignments or activities within their courses that don’t have a clear purpose, advises Benjamin Wiggins, manager of biology instruction at the University of Washington.

When faculty members put extra energy into more purposeful activities, students will appreciate fewer categories of assignments, Wiggins said in a December faculty stress webinar hosted by online content provider Course Hero.

“Anything you grade every two weeks that you don’t have a great reason for, just cut it,” Wiggins said. “Be absolutely brutal with how you pull things out.”

Faculty should also set boundaries between work and their personal lives. Wiggins’ team, for example, has made it a rule to not send emails between noon on Friday and Monday morning.

Three out of four faculty members reported significant stress while transitioning to new modes of teaching, according to a recent Course Hero survey of 570 full- and part-time faculty at two- and four-year colleges.

But many faculty members have been more focused on making the shift successfully than on their own mental health needs, says Tara Graham, Course Hero’s vice president of educator communities.

“When a student comes into office hours, faculty members don’t know they’re going to talk about subject matter or if they’re going to have to put on their grief counselor or therapist hat,” Graham said.

Faculty members should also reflect on what’s missing in their personal lives and fill that gap with a hobby, said Mary McNaughton-Cassill, a professor of psychology at The University of Texas at San Antonio, during the webinar.

For instance, someone who feels they are spending too much time on Zoom and other online meetings should take up mindfulness or yoga, McNaughton-Cassill said. “With burnout, people feel overwhelmed by the demands on them, and their initial strategy is to try to do more, they say ‘Let me work harder to get through it.’”

Matt Zalaznick is UB’s senior writer.

3 ways to boost engagement
An overlooked casualty of the pandemic is employee engagement. Pattie Wagner, a human resources expert with the firm Sikich, offers three ways to keep faculty involved:

1. Be transparent. Employees appreciate being kept in the loop. Outlining clear guidelines and expectations for employees can prepare them to perform well in a fluid environment.

2. Embrace flexibility. Leaders should ensure team members understand the technology available to them and are proficient with these tools. Additionally, leaders need to continue to find creative ways to manage teams that may be dispersed for an extended period.

3. Show empathy. Leaders should foster peer-to-peer communication and show empathy by listening to employees’ concerns and working hard to address their questions.
PROFESSIONAL OPINION

Why lawyers make excellent academic leaders

Increasing numbers of colleges are realizing that the fundraising skills and fiscal management acumen of lawyers make them uniquely qualified to succeed as campus presidents.

By Patricia E. Salkin

The State University of New York told its 64-campus network to expect a 25% reduction in state aid this year, on top of mounting revenue shortfalls from empty dorm rooms and lackluster out-of-state and foreign student enrollment. Add to this the empty athletic stadiums, canceled concerts and other ticketed programs, and the economic bottom line reveals staggering multi-million dollar shortfalls.

The story is the same on public and private campuses across the U.S. The ripple effects of the growing economic typhoon will be felt for years to come as each institution struggles to recover from the lasting impacts of COVID. A president with legal training can put the lawyer’s toolkit to good use making tough decisions, navigating complexities of compliance, and addressing issues arising from programmatic, human resources and contractual obligations.

An increasing number of colleges and universities are discovering that lawyers often have the qualifications needed to succeed as presidents in the 21st century. For example, a large number of lawyer presidents have had government experience. In the current fiscal crisis, these individuals have a distinct advantage in advocating for funding for higher education as a whole and for the individual programs on their campuses that may qualify for support from diverse funding streams/programs within governments.

Notably, these former government lawyers turned campus leaders also have substantial experience fundraising for political candidates. They’ve demonstrated an affinity for asking for contributions and opening a vast untapped network of wealthy givers who could easily become college donors. Their varied legal experience is buttressed by business acumen and fiscal management experience from running law firms, serving corporations and working as general counsel inside higher education.

Seasoned fundraisers are needed now more than ever. There is a desperate need for non-government revenue sources to fill the widening gap created by staggering decreases in the usual revenue sources and from impediments to traditional campus-based and in-person “friend-raising” cultivation programs.

Academic administrators are scrambling to identify new revenue streams for needed scholarship support for a growing number of students who find themselves and their families victims of the economic havoc wrought by COVID. The pandemic adds severe pressure on the already thin financial ice of many institutions of higher education. That is why it is search committee malpractice to fail to make fiscal sustainability a priority goal.

A growing subset of lawyer presidents possess specific higher ed fundraising experience, having served as vice presidents for institutional advancement, trustees and alumni leaders. Recent appointments include more than three dozen lawyer leaders whose full-time jobs prior to assuming the campus presidency was in higher education philanthropy.

Some lawyer presidents served as deans of law schools where fundraising is a priority. Perhaps because of constraints on accessing certain public funds to support the institutions, religiously affiliated schools seem to place great value on prior fundraising experience for their lawyer presidents with a noticeable number of such appointments. Looking at the track record of various campus lawyer leaders with fundraising experience, there is a consistent pattern of dramatic growth in philanthropic, foundation and public support.

Academic institutions are thoughtfully open to others with backgrounds that would have been atypical appointments only a few years ago, such as those with credibility as experts in health and medical services. The number of women lawyer presidents has increased, consistent with both national trends in higher ed and women in the legal profession.

By expanding the pool of candidates beyond the traditional central casting notion of an academic leader, institutions could also find highly qualified candidates with desired diverse backgrounds who bring unique skill sets needed at this time. Given the noticeable number of recent law schools appointing minorities and women deans, not to mention judges and leading lawyers, considering JDs in addition to conventional PhDs could offer search committees compelling new choices.

Patricia E. Salkin is senior vice president for academic affairs of the Touro College and University System and provost for the Graduate and Professional Divisions at Touro College. This piece is part of her larger dissertation on lawyers as campus leaders for her Ph.D. in Creativity at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.
LAST WORD

Why MBA programs need to serve first-gen students

It’s time for MBA curriculum and supports to address the unique needs of first-generation students working to get their foot in the door of the business industry.

By Joyce A. Banjac and Brooke Peppard

In 2020, the world of business changed dramatically. Advanced technology reshaped business models across every industry in response to the pandemic, while corporate initiatives embracing diversity, inclusion and equity gained momentum. To serve the new normal in business, MBA programs are scrambling to adapt their offerings, adjusting in real-time as change reverberates through the business world. Evolving MBA programs must seek new ways to educate, train and prepare diverse talent pools to be at the forefront of innovation when they graduate.

After decades of improvement in college enrollment for first-generation college students, they are now the students hardest hit by COVID-19, with colleges showing the steepest enrollment declines among first-gen students of color, rural white students and low-income adults.

To adapt to changing business needs, MBA programs must keep first-gen students top of mind when building their curriculum. Diversity of thought, backgrounds and culture are essential for the advancement of successful businesses. First-gen students have the potential to significantly contribute the business world, if given the tools they need to get there.

A Campus Labs survey found that first-generation students tend to be more engaged in their college experience than their peers. They are often among the most committed to improving the world and challenging the status quo, a mindset the business world desperately needs today.

Unfortunately, first-gen students face a myriad of challenges when pursuing graduate degrees. Unless you have the mindset of a first-gen student, it’s difficult to understand their unique needs.

One common challenge is the familial pressure to pursue a steady paycheck rather than an advanced degree. These families often fail to see the long-term payoff of an MBA and don’t feel it is worth the upfront tuition investment. Colleges in turn often fail to offer affordable tuition rates, further deterring these students from enrollment. Tuition for the MBA program at Notre Dame College, at $15,000, remains as one of the lowest in the Ohio region. It’s important for first-gen students to weigh the offerings of various MBA programs to find one that meets their needs.

Research indicates that first-gen students are more likely than their counterparts to experience greater feelings of self-doubt, lack confidence and judge themselves by the skills that their peers have developed but they have not.

Academic, social and career supports

First-gen students need certain supports in place to be successful in an MBA program. Higher education must do more to integrate students into their institutions and cultivate stronger bonds of belonging. Unlike many of their peers, first-gen students don’t have a parent to walk them through the process of getting a graduate degree. They are also unlikely to have connections in the business world and need an MBA program with an emphasis on networking and building social capital to get their foot in the door.

For example, a First-Generation Center at Notre Dame is dedicated to providing financial and career counseling, alumni mentorship from fellow first-gen graduates and academic support. Giving first-gen graduate students the opportunity to connect with their first-gen peers can make a world of difference in their confidence and motivation to finish their degree.

First-gen students are incredibly resilient and can withstand adversity more readily than those with less-challenging experiences in higher education. These traits serve them and their employers well, as they are often more willing to make necessary sacrifices to get ahead. The fact that they have faced challenges across multiple fronts from cultural, financial and familial backgrounds augments their ability to interact with diverse populations in the business world.

Generalist and affordable MBA programs that stress how to thrive in a constantly changing environment will prepare first-gen students to think critically, creatively and conceptually about business. They will learn how to adapt in real-time, analyze and assess data and build relational bridges which are of vital necessity as virtual technologies remake the commercial landscape.

It’s time for universities to evolve their MBA programs to serve the needs of first-gen students so they can continue to change the business world for the better. These students have the attitude and tenacity to spark tremendous change, and higher education just needs to give them the tools to get there.
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