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Exiting the Pandemic: A Leadership Approach to Critical Engagement & Change

J. Kevin Fisher & Joan Seamster

Navigating in uncertain times is an understatement for leaders in higher education. There is no playbook for today's institutional challenges. Student needs, administrative requirements, faculty demands, and community relations all warrant a fresh look into how institutions address the risks that threaten business as usual. COVID-19 has challenged the status quo – shaking established methods of conducting and promoting higher education to its core. Do the higher education community and all it constitutes realize it? Will leadership in higher education take the necessary steps to bring all stakeholders together to shape the path to the future? To answer these questions, every leader in higher education from board members to faculty members needs to understand whether or not their institution possesses the characteristics and competencies to innovate, change and grow. Through our research, conversations, and observations we address the unconscious defenses which can challenge any institution and propose a Framework for Risk Classification in Higher Education consisting of nine risk dimensions.

Getting through any crisis requires leaders to ask the right questions of the right people. The best leaders engage in a process that brings all stakeholders into focus, promotes an honest discussion to assess the current state of the organization, and collectively builds the bridge to the future. We present a series of critical questions for today's leaders in higher education. These questions are centered in three areas: Institutional Purpose & Values, Stakeholder Engagement, and Operational Orientation.

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The past year and a half will go down in history as the period that changed higher education forever. Beyond the pandemic that has forced institutions all over the world to vacate their campuses and shift their efforts to remote learning to deliver their courses, this period has called into question the fundamental beliefs and practices of higher education. Will the fallout from the Covid-19 experience enable us to re-evaluate how to expand educational environments to be more inclusive of, and responsive to, the unique needs of a diverse population of students, faculty and community?

As practitioners in higher education struggle to reshape the day-to-day life of college campuses, we need to ask the question, “Is it the virus or is it us?” This pandemic has shaken the very foundation of the communities where we operate. Should we, as educators and members of the community, move beyond our comfort zones, be less ideological about what we are as people and institutions and be more focused on innovation and experimentation as we face uncertainty? “In short, there is much that we need to rethink about the current model of higher education. Success in the future won’t be defined by a degree, but by potential and the ability to learn, apply, and adapt.”

Over the past eighteen months, we engaged a wide range of administrators and educators in discussions on the business model of higher education. Since then we have watched how this current pandemic has strained some of New England’s leading schools on every front imaginable. What has been often referred to as Cracks in the Ivory Tower has now laid bare some of the fundamental problems and challenges facing higher education.

In 2011, the late Clay Christensen of Harvard Business School boldly predicted that upwards of 50% of the nation’s colleges and universities would go bankrupt . While the actual number is far below the prediction, there is an undeniable increase in closures and mergers across the country. Based upon publicly available data from 2016 – February 2020, approximately 60 institutions closed or merged.

In the past few years there have been a growing number of closures and mergers among both the public and private institutions. Moody’s Investor Services cites financial pressures stemming from a number of cost and economic factors, but conversations with a number of professors and administrators suggest issues tend to go beyond basic finances. In Massachusetts, Governor Charlie Baker signed into law (Nov. 14, 2019) An Act to Support Improved Financial

Stability in Higher Education (H4099). This act gave the state's Board of Higher Education authority to monitor the financial health of colleges and universities operating within its jurisdiction.

In the wake of COVID-19, established methods of conducting and promoting higher education have been shaken to their core. The question is, "Does the higher education community and all its constituents realize this enormous shift?"

Beyond Unconscious Defenses – The Risks

Starting in December (2019), at a roundtable discussion with a diverse group of professionals from area schools, we set out to uncover some of challenges and issues facing colleges and universities. One of the initial questions was whether or not the business models of higher education were working. Moreover, as the pressures facing many institutions are reshaping their day-to-day practices, their risk management techniques are struggling to keep up.

To this end, institutions are being challenged to adopt new approaches to delivering student services and managing their operations. We believed that increasingly, the risk management and oversight afforded these activities must become an integral part of the overall strategic framework for the Industry. While absolute requirements or even "best practices" may be nascent in critical areas, guidance to address the rapidly changing needs of higher education is warranted.

After analyzing our findings and surveying the headline news covering higher education, we identified nine dimensions of risks for further consideration: strategic, financial, student, faculty, staff, community, operational, reputation, and governance/legal risks. (See Exhibit a: Framework for Risk Classification in Higher Education)

Framework for Risk Classification in Higher Education			
Institutional Purpose & Values – Why			
Strategic & Mission Risk		Financial Risk	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncontrollable costs • Student default • Credentialing by corporate America • Curriculum • Merger/acquisitions 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget shortfalls • Reduction of federal support • Heightened cash monitoring • Risk-sharing on student default • Change in tax status • Development 	
Stakeholder Engagement – Who			
Student Risk	Faculty Risk	Staff Risk	Community Risk
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment • Drop out • Mental health • Student support • Student safety • Loan defaults • Int'l students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talent management • Engagement • Recruitment • Compensation • Oversight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talent management • Compensation • Workforce productivity • Competencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement • Economic • Alumni relations • Gov't relations • Conflict Resolution
Operational Orientation – What & How			
Operational Risk	Reputation Risk	Governance/Legal Risk	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrollments • Regulatory changes • Security (physical/ technology) • Education delivery mix • Efficiencies • Facilities & asset management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accreditation • Student activism • Brand management • Public relations & Outreach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board oversight • Contracts/partnerships • Grants • Student lawsuits • Labor disputes • Compliance 	

Exhibit a: Framework for Risk Classification in Higher Education

Following our initial meeting with our group of higher education professionals, we posed a series of questions to gain further insight into the risks facing colleges and universities. From the Framework for Risk Classification in Higher Education, six risk themes emerged. (See Exhibit b: Risk Themes in Higher Education)

Independent of these themes, there was general agreement among our group of participants that deep within higher education’s culture are unconscious defenses that resist change. Whether it is how institutions address (or do not address) the needs of students, the waste within the system, disparity within the ranks of professors and administrators, or the current operating practices at a given institution, higher education is being strained on all fronts.

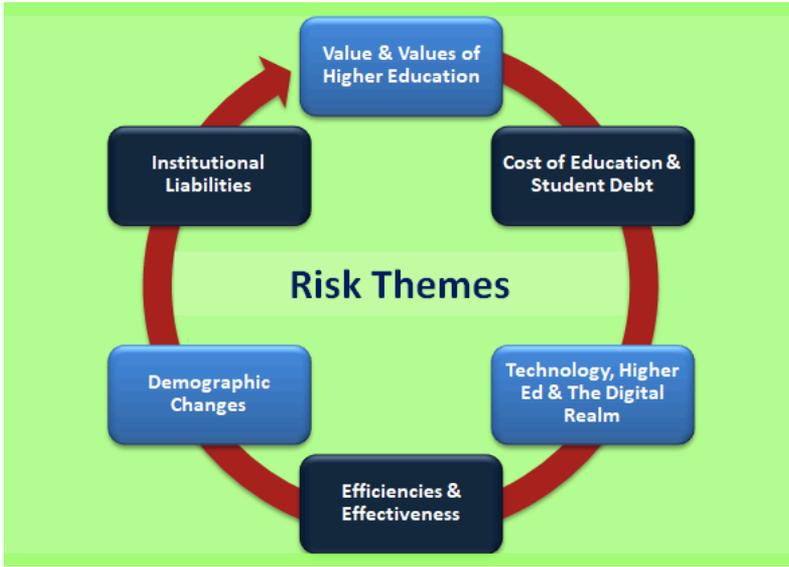


Exhibit b: Risk Themes in Higher Education

1. Value & Values of Higher Education

One of the most tangible proofs of value for higher education is the relationship between higher education and employment. As of June 2021, 74.1% individuals with at least a bachelor degree or more were employed. In contrast, only 40.2% of individuals with only a high school diploma or less were employed. . This efficacy is also evident in unemployment numbers. As of 2021, 3.7% of college graduates were unemployed, compared to 6.9% of workers with only a high school diploma.

Yet the perceived value of higher education is in flux. Contributing to this reputational erosion includes the decline in enrollment, the cost-cutting measures being made to lower institutional overhead, parent dissatisfaction with their student’s campus and learning experiences and the ensuing litigation. “More and more, parents look to colleges to keep their children safe and well. When tragedy strikes, they take those dashed expectations to the courthouse.”

The mission-driven values of higher education will vary from institution to institution. The leadership of these institutions needs to not only focus on strengthening their business model, but also shoring up their institutional

reputation. “Higher ed is hurting. Our entire operating model is under siege, the revenue losses [are] unprecedented, and campus leaders are beginning to respond to historic challenges. They are realizing that cost-cutting alone is not the answer, and that this is a time to clarify their institution’s unique value to their students and communities.”

2. Cost of Education & Student Debt

The cost of education and student debt continues to threaten access to higher education. Rising tuition threatens affordability and access, leaving many students unable to afford higher education, saddled with debt, or choosing not to pursue post-secondary educational opportunities. U.S. student loan debt totals \$1.75 trillion and is growing six times faster than the nation’s economy.

Systemic challenges, which existed pre-COVID and have been aggravated by the pandemic, are contributing to broader social inequities. Data shows that, between 2000 and 2018, the median student debt for white borrowers nearly doubled from \$12,000 to \$23,000; however, Black borrowers saw that number quadrupled – increasing from about \$7,000 to \$30,000 over the same period. By 2020, higher education attendance has had the biggest drop amongst students of color, with data showing that lower income students were the most likely to not return to school during the pandemic.

3. Technology, Higher Ed & the Digital Realm

COVID-19, like any other world event, is an inflection point for rapid innovation. While we have yet to see whether this will apply to e-learning post-COVID-19, what has been made clear through this pandemic is the importance of disseminating knowledge across borders, companies, and all parts of society. If online learning technology can play a role here, it is incumbent upon all leaders in education to explore its full potential.

Using technology as a channel for learning creates new challenges and opportunities beyond simply connecting online. To fully harness the potential of technology in the wake COVID-19 disruption, institutions must place the needs of students at the forefront to afford optimal access to the accelerating adoption of new technologies.

4. Inefficiencies & Effectiveness

Inefficiencies undermine institutional effectiveness. Operating efficiently means controlling costs on inputs, processes, and assets. Even before COVID-19, scores of the nation's private colleges were already facing a financial health pandemic. This has been emblematic of the flaws in operating models of a range of institutions.

COVID-19 fundamentally changed how colleges and institutions operate and their models of conducting business. The severity of the fiscal impact has been blunted for the short term by the Federal Government's \$76 billion investment with the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF). Leaders must be vigilant in challenging the entrenched business practices and unconscious defenses to optimize operational performance that is congruent with their institutional mission.

5. Demographic Changes

The make-up of the student population continues to change. But the one fixed data point is that the traditional college age student population is declining. By 2026, the number of college-age students in the U.S. will have dropped by 15 percent. When viewing this drop regionally, the Northeast and eastern Midwest will be hit the hardest, with 20 to 25% fewer college-going students.

These demographic trends, coupled with the fall-out of COVID-19, have directly impacted enrollment. First-year enrollment from Fall of 2018 to Fall 2021 dropped 12.3%. With incoming students more difficult to recruit, it becomes even more important for administration and faculty to engage with their current student body. By recognizing the unique characteristics of their current and prospective students, institutions increase the likelihood of meeting the educational needs of those students they seek to serve.

6. Institutional Liabilities

Liabilities equal risks. COVID-19 has created a perfect storm for legal challenges in higher education. The nature and impact of liabilities facing colleges and universities include student safety, institutional performance, admissions, faculty recruitment/evaluations, and collective bargaining. Higher education was already in for the kind of shakeout big business experienced in

the 1980s - closings, mergers, and personnel suits among the resulting legal shocks. There are currently a significant number of cases testing the range of colleges' responsibility and culpability. As higher education continues to face downsizing, a slew of new liability, litigation, and contract problems will be inevitable. "Whether a case concerns abuse, financial oversight, medical issues, or antitrust claims, it is increasingly likely to take the form of a class action. Colleges are caught in society's cultural and political crossfire, and vulnerable to record-setting jury judgments."

Students' Changing Needs

The needs of students continuously evolve. Everyone likes to say that today's students are different than those in the past. Students may act differently, but they tend to be a product of their upbringing, reflecting the societal norms and economic realities of their respective communities. As colleges and universities push to secure enrollment, careful consideration of the ever-changing needs of students must take place. Institutions must be equipped to address students' needs. Educational leaders – faculty and administration alike – must strive to assure that the whole student is considered when shaping the college experience. These efforts cannot just focus on diversity; rather, they must focus on equity and inclusion in order to make all feel welcome and involved on the campus.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the future of student life. Beyond the basics of adjusting to relocation, addressing technology demands, finding a study space with sufficient internet capacity and adapting to a new class and study schedule, some students, especially international students, are faced with decisions beyond whether or not they go online to attend a class. These student decisions are things of immediate concern. Going forward, these challenges for students need careful consideration.

In reflecting on the past academic year with classes and graduations cancelled, the symbolism and experience of an on-campus ceremony has lost meaning – upending traditions. For administrators and faculty, graduation plays a significant role in how the value of the education is perceived as well as how the accomplishments and sacrifices made by students and their families are acknowledged. For the students and their families, this ceremony caps years of work and marks a milestone in a student's life.

Consider the issue of student debt. According to the Federal Reserve, student loan debt now exceeds \$1.5 trillion with the average student now graduating with \$32,731 of debt . This is a consequence of the rise in the cost of tuition in the face of wage stagnation for the average family. For over twenty-five years, with inequality rising steeply, there is concurrent growth inequality in educational opportunity. The debt burden higher education places on students, it can be argued, is adding to the growing inequality we see in society. We need to ask ourselves, “Does the debt solution we are offering contribute to the problems we are trying to solve for students?” As we progress down this path, how students will look at this debt/benefit ratio going forward is subject to change - calling into question the value of higher education.

The Impact on Faculty

There is very little discussion among stakeholders about the longer-term impact of the faculty transition to online teaching. The immediate faculty conversations focus on tips and tricks of teaching online and transitioning their pedagogy to this new venue. They are able to improve their online teaching impact in the short term by incorporating frequent student feedback. They are also meeting and learning best practices from each other. This is critical in this transition period.

What does the longer term, or “re-entry” look like? The steps above are all short-term oriented, but in reality, faculty roles are being reshaped significantly. The relationship a faculty has with its institution will be changed forever. “The simple and undeniable fact is that — for more than a year — labs were closed, classrooms shoved online, archives and libraries shuttered, and all parts of the scholarly enterprise profoundly disrupted. In addition, some faculty members faced severe productivity constraints...If we aren’t acknowledging how those factors have significantly reshaped the current academic landscape; we have no business judging anyone else’s scholarly aptitude.” It is time to throw out the old leadership playbook in education and begin to define a new path forward.

If we consider lessons learned from financial crises in recent history, industry leaders might use the situation as a call to restructure the long-standing arrangements that may be taxing higher education – for example tenure and staffing. In the past industry leaders have used crises to “cull the herd.” This process has been already happening. By 2016, almost 75% of teaching faculty

was non-tenure track. One can expect that the impact of COVID-19 will exacerbate this reality.

We have seen this before in other industries – for example, the automotive and airline industries. Rightly or wrongly, industry leaders taken the opportunity to restructure employee benefits, cut salaries and rewrite contracts.

The Problem/Challenge for Society/Community

According to research by the Pew Research Center , “There is a growing undercurrent of dissatisfaction – even suspicion – among the public about the role colleges play in society, the way admissions decisions are made and the extent to which free speech is constrained on college campuses. All the while, there has been less discussion about the institution’s impact on its surrounding community.”

Throughout the pandemic, impact on the community folds into the conversations about loss of retail business and fall-off of businesses that support these institutions and their constituents. Closing of campuses and social distancing has demonstrated significant impact on the businesses surrounding colleges and universities.

The Challenge for Higher Education’s Leaders

Once the coronavirus gripped the country, everything changed for colleges and universities. What had been viewed as simply financial constraints, admissions issues and housing problems have been blown open. The current situation is spotlighting problems that have been simmering for years. In essence, the coronavirus has revealed the structural problems and weaknesses that have been undermining the future of higher education.

For example, as administrators work on the transition to online learning, the impact on their institutions is more significant. They are also dealing with both their student populations’ reactions and the faculty’s challenges in switching to online delivery and online academic experience.

At the same time, they are looking towards the next incoming class and what that will look like. Schools that anticipate a drop in yield because of the current crisis may turn to a range of admissions-based solutions. Instead of treating

this as temporary challenge, is it time for institutions to retrench and review the deeper problems and challenges that exist?

To identify internal challenges and recognizing the externalities which all stakeholders face today, leaders must get better at recognizing the forces that are promoting or impeding change. This is not new. We all have responded to a myriad of pressures that have been mounting against our institutions for decades. Rising costs, funding, revenues, competition and demographic shifts, are stressing the business models of institutions everywhere.

If the past teaches us anything, actions and approaches that used to thrive were typically based on an ideology consistent with institutional traditions. However, the competitive forces and changing demographics are producing challenges that require a renewed focus on strategies and tactics that are fundamentally different than those of the past.

“The disruptions caused by COVID-19 are an opportunity for improvement. Assessment is now positioned to take advantage of recent developments aimed at strengthening its purpose and meaning. Positive trends in assessment practice and in accreditation standards, including the adoption of essential learning outcomes for all students and greater attention to equity and educational attainment, can help prioritize assessment activities in this time of crisis.”

If leaders simply believe that money is the answer, then the longer-term implications of COVID-19 on the institution will be unclear.

Critical Questions for Educational Leaders

Ultimately, getting through any crisis requires leaders to ask the right questions of the right people. The best leaders engage in a process that brings all stakeholders into focus, promotes an honest discussion to assess the current state of the organization, and collectively builds the bridge to the future.

Institutional Purpose & Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Will our mission and purpose change post COVID? How will our values be impacted? How will the fall-out from this crisis impact our future? How will we remain relevant? What will be the business model going forward? How will we mitigate risk across the organization? How will we address the current situation in ways that are consistent with values? 	Stakeholder Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the changing needs of students evident in this crisis? How will students and community view the value of the institution? Will higher education remain a gateway to opportunity? How will faculty engagement change? Will staffing allocations need to change? How will our relationships to community evolve? How will teaching modalities assure learning and reflect organizational values? 	Operational Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What will be best practices for student support? What will be post-COVID safety guidelines? Will facilities management change? Will asset management change? How will requirements for accreditation change? Should expectations of the board of directors change? Will outreach and and public relations match the post-COVID mission and values? Will compliance efforts need to change? Will oversight practices need to change?
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Exhibit c: Critical Questions for Educational Leaders

How colleges and universities contribute to their larger community is not fully appreciated or understood among stakeholders. The closing of schools and the lack of a green light for reopening will reshape communities into the future. Some areas of the country are more vulnerable than others. Massachusetts is particularly vulnerable because of the number and concentrations of higher education institutions in and around the Boston area.

Navigating in Uncertain Times

There is no playbook for today's institutional challenges. The closing of university campuses is costing schools in many ways. Does this become the force for higher education to bring all stakeholders together to shape the path to the future? To answer this question, every leader in higher education from board member to faculty member needs to understand whether or not their institution possesses the characteristics and competencies to innovate, change and grow.

As we have highlighted throughout this article, the time of COVID-19 in higher education is an opportunity for liberation. Every leader in higher education, from board member to faculty member, needs to understand whether or not their institution possesses the characteristics and competencies to innovate, change and grow. The culture and practices within an institution's current business model and the defensive posture towards change may be blocking the innovation needed to face the future. What can institutional leadership do to promote the changes and innovation necessary to excel? Are they satisfied with their ability to move their organization forward to meet their challenges?

Leaders in higher education need to start immediately to understand how effectively their institutions will proceed after this unprecedented disruption. Easier said than done; the entrenched culture at many organizations often punishes those pushing for change. Recognizing and addressing the problems that present institutional risk is critical.

If there is any silver lining resulting from COVID-19, it is that this disruptive period has unfrozen business as usual – a critical step in effecting change in any organization. For institutions to thrive in the future, all stakeholders must embrace the path forward together. Will higher education leadership mitigate the risks and build a path to a thriving future? This will be the test for all leadership..

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