

# What's Next?

Interviews to understand what members of the campus community are thinking in the midst of the Covid-19 chaos



# INTRODUCTION

## **Because of the Covid-19 crisis, events are unfolding quickly in higher education.**

As a result, leaders are called on to make decisions without enough information.

To assist our clients and other leaders, we offer this snapshot of the thinking of a cross-section of campus community members about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In all, 79 in-depth interviews were conducted. We wanted to learn what the campus community thought about the current situation and its resolution. We were interested in learning what our interviewees thought and felt important to share with us. We promised interviewees that neither they nor their schools would be identified.

Our sample was selected from our mailing list of 5,000 names with every effort to include a variety of roles. We interviewed 6 presidents, 13 president's cabinet members (provosts and vice presidents), 20 administrators (associate vice presidents, deans, and department heads from student affairs, academic affairs and business and campus security), 19 faculty, and 21 undergraduate students. Nine of the students were interviewed by a student peer to make sure we had accurate insights.

Many of our interview findings are consistent with those reported in the professional and popular media. However, they are presented in context of the interviewed segments along with some commentary. While this data is unscientific and anecdotal, we believe it does provide insights that are valuable.

## **About the Author**



Laurence N. Smith is the co-founder and senior partner at New Campus Dynamics. He has been a champion of innovation and change in higher education for four decades as a senior university administrator and as a national leader in the field. He is emeritus Vice President for University Marketing and Student Affairs at Eastern Michigan University and the co-author of a number of books including *Leading Innovation and Change: A Guide for Chief Student Affairs Officers on Shaping the Future*, *The Leader's Guide to Creating a Culture of Strategic Innovation*, and *Mobilizing the Campus for Retention*

## COMMON THEMES



**There was deep concern that, because of the dramatic consequences their recommendations could have, they would not want the responsibility for implementing them.**

There were several common themes that came up among many interviewees:

- Interviewees described that what they had in common was **ambiguity, uncertainty, and paralyzing anxiety** over what current options existed and what the future was beginning to look like.
- There was also the feeling that no matter what took place, **nothing could or would be secure** until the promised “warp-time” vaccine was created and administered throughout the United States and the world.
- Almost all interviewees stressed how Covid-19’s impact disrupted as well as **devastated their situation** both personally and professionally.
- Among those offering suggestions about **what changes they would recommend** about what should be done, there was deep concern that because of the dramatic consequences their recommendations could have, they would not want the responsibility for implementing them.
- Among administrators and faculty strong consensus that the virus opened the window to **problems in higher education that may have existed before it exposed them**. But in their desire to return to the “good old days,” or even a “new normal” they felt that many important needs would not be addressed because the people who are in charge would probably still be in their jobs.

## PRESIDENTS AND CABINET MEMBERS

**Almost all college and university presidents and cabinet members reported that what they do for this fall could determine the future of their institution.**

At the center of their concerns was the financial impact on their institution and the inability to cut through the confusion to make successful short and long-term decisions that could successfully guide the transformational process.



Among items they felt needed immediate attention were projected enrollment declines, the

impact of remote learning, poaching of students by competitor institutions, erosion of family financial resources affecting reenrollment of students, and, agreement that “sheltering in place” may be a wise approach not a realistic one.

Given the opportunity to make recommendations to the governor of their state on what should be done, there were no takers. Once again, they reflected concern that what they wanted to happen carried dramatic unknowns that could bring horrible results.

One leader seemed to sum up an unspoken but widely held concern when she stated *“as desirable as having classes and our residence halls filled again, it might be more than we could manage if there were to be students who had the virus, especially if some died. I shudder at the damage it could cause to our university’s reputation and stability.”*

## COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS

University administrators, deans, department heads, felt that the decisions being made about reopening or redirecting services were out of their hands. They felt “in the dark” about what was happening and worried about their positions and those of their support personnel.



A director of campus security indicated he was at loss in terms of how his areas would need to perform if returning students ignored campus Covid-19 policies.

A health Center director indicated that if student were to return in the fall, she was concerned about lacking protective equipment and who was making policies about spacing in the classrooms and residence halls and other campus facilities and events. She was perturbed by the lack of support she received for her coordinating with community health professionals and services.

A student affairs dean expressed the biggest concern that he and his colleagues had about fall opening was over its ability to respond to a virus-related emergency due to the college’s remote location that had very limited medical and hospital support.

Student affairs administrators were concerned about budget reductions being forced on their counseling services. They stressed their frustration that, under the strain the pandemic is having on students, the services needed most n were being eroded. Other concerns expressed related to whether they should be planning a required, special reorientation programs for returning students.

Almost all administrators were anxious about their areas facing large budget cuts, when given the situation they would probably need more resources.

## FACULTY



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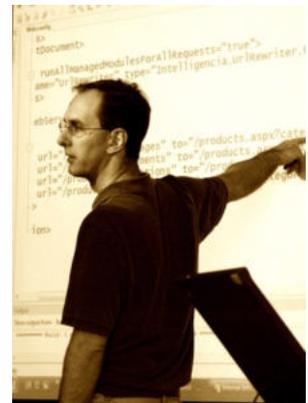
All faculty members expressed concerns related to their learning to teach remotely, the need for assistance with course and presentation design, and concerns that the top-down decision making does not include their input, and the erosion of their professional standing.

One of the interviews was with the chair of his institution’s faculty senate. His remarks, which he read from a memo he intended to send out to the school’s president and board, represents the feeling expressed by most of the faculty we interviewed.

*“We faculty are not a very expensive commodity. We are the core of the university. We have more face time with students than any group of people employed at this institution. How we are treated informs us as to how we are perceived. Lack of administrative support during this very turbulent time is corrosive.”*

Several faculty members noted that the coronavirus has done what the administration could not by forcing us to conduct distance learning and learn how to use digital media effectively.

One said, *“Telling us we are dispensable and can be replaced by less expensive adjunct teachers is demeaning and unproductive. Eroding tenure and academic freedom to appease the misinformed is counterproductive and weakens the university even if it saves a few dollars and responds to those who fear truths they do not like. We faculty are a proud people and have worked hard to become outstanding in what we do. Our effectiveness depends upon how the university expresses our value to it, how it invests in us with support and resources to move from a closed classroom to an open media platform for teaching, and how it maintains the values inherent in its mission protected by academic freedom and tenure.”*



## STUDENTS AND FAMILIES



**Student interviews revealed high levels of disappointment, irritation, and confusion about their situation and what they expressed as undefinable and unacceptable alternatives.**

A thread common in most interviews was that their childhood years were spent in the aftermath of the 2008 recession, followed by years of school shootings and insecurities over their personal safety and long-term success.

A number of interviewees who were parents of current students and graduating high school students, were very stressed that they (and their children's grandparents) could no longer afford financial commitments made to their children. Because of sharp decreases in the value of investments and retirement funds, reduced family resources will have a drastic impact on enrollment.

Most of the 4-year college and university students plan to return but want to wait until they do not have to worry about becoming a virus victim. A few students also indicated they found it strange that other colleges they also were accepted at had invited them to consider transferring.

Student from small colleges were impressed that they received calls from some of their professors wanting to know how they were holding up and encouraging them to stay in touch. Others indicated that their schools had directed them to keep checking the school's website for updates. There was no one to call since no one answered the phone or when reached by email, officials said they also lacked information.

International students in graduate programs were particularly conflicted. Most would like to return to complete their studies, but worry that if they return home, they will not be allowed back in the country. Many will choose to stay in the U.S. for now without a clear plan.

A common theme was that taking courses online was not the college experience they signed up for and that if it became the only way they could achieve their bachelor's degree, they might as well take course at less expensive schools.

When asked what was the one thing that they found most irritating about their current situation, it was moving back home and being treated by their parents as if they were still in high school. One student indicated that the most annoying thing was that his brother would not give him back his room.

# WHAT'S NEXT?

## Three things you can be certain of in this uncertain time:

### #1 More Pressure for Rapid Decisions

There is tremendous pressure for colleges and universities to commit to how/whether they will reopen in the fall.

Those decisions are being made in an environment that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. Nevertheless, as of this writing, 68% of institutions surveyed plan to resume in-person classes in the fall. Only 20% say they are waiting to decide or considering a range of scenarios.

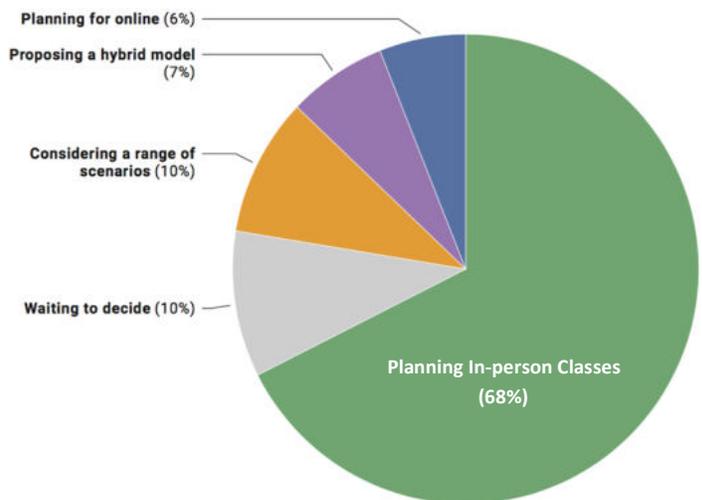
### #2 Huge Risks Regardless of Decisions

*“The range of choices colleges have lies, regrettably, between bad and horrific”*

So says Prof. Stan Yoshinobu, who provides 18 reasons not to resume in-person classes in his recent article, [The Case Against Reopening](#). Most of those reasons center around the high probability that students in close proximity will trigger a new outbreak of Covid-19. He offers a thought experiment to illustrate:

**Assume a college rolls the dice and offers in-person classes this fall, and that its campus becomes the site of an outbreak in October. Thousands get sick and dozens die. What parent would send their kid to Coronavirus U. the following year?**

### 68% of Schools to Resume In-Person Fall Classes



Source: Chronicle of Higher Education May 18, 2020

### #3 Agility Essential for Survival

Robust systems for innovation are going to be essential in the post-Covid era.

As conditions change, your institution will need to adjust in real time. That means all segments of the campus community, faculty, students, staff, and administrators, will need to support decisions and be willing to help implement them.

While the data in this report provides a window into what people are thinking and feeling generally, you need to engage your community in both creating and carrying out decisions that require their cooperation.

## HOW CAN WE HELP?

# INVOLVE FACULTY, STAFF AND STUDENTS THROUGH FACILITATED INTERACTIVE ONLINE MEETINGS



We hope you found this special report useful. Now we invite you to explore how we can help you prepare for what's next.

New Campus Dynamics and Covision Design have teamed to offer a custom, facilitated online process for university leaders to use in leading the way toward successfully return to the campus.

We offer a flexible virtual way to bring together your institution's key stakeholders in a high-energy, fully inclusive journey through current realities, critical inputs, myriad choices and an on-ramp to the key decisions.

The outcomes of understanding, alignment and ownership — achieved by opening a community dialogue and giving a voice to the many in a very short time frame — cannot be delivered in any other way.



## DESIGN + PROCESS + TECHNOLOGY

### Find Out More

There is no obligation. Contact Al Blixt, Managing Partner and we will get right back to you to answer questions and see if we are a match.

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