

COVID-19: Using scenario planning to prepare for an uncertain future

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is compelling colleges, universities, and schools to approach planning for the upcoming academic year in a dramatically different way.

by Ronald A. Wendeln, Ph.D.



COVID-19 hit colleges and universities hard midway through the spring 2020 semester. Institutions scurried to make critical real-time decisions about public health, campus access, and transitioning to online coursework—often flying blindly about consequences and costs.

We are still in a fog about how the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery will evolve by state, nationally, and internationally. Yet, while still closing out the 2019-20 academic year, colleges and universities must immediately pivot to prepare for 2020-21.

Our usual planning techniques, meant for times of relative stability, are not sufficient to navigate this extraordinary period of uncertainty. Instead, we need to turn to **scenario and contingency planning methods** to understand and handle the various ways that COVID-19 might play out.

Based on our extensive experience in the art of scenario planning, we outline six steps that colleges and universities can take to prepare for the 2020-21 academic year.

1. Organize for contingency planning

Colleges and universities can organize in four ways to gather and share intelligence, consider options, fast-track strategies and actions, allocate resources, and communicate progress.

- **Set up a Command Center.** As in any emergency, a COVID-19 response requires a command center of senior administrative officers and other key governance, administrative, and faculty representatives who are charged with setting the institutional direction and policy for contingency planning. This team is the “nerve center” in constant two-way communications with front-line administrators, faculty, students, and other constituencies. The command center draws staff support from institutional research and planning, administrative data systems, instructional technologies, public and constituency relations, web and media technologies, and budgeting and finance.
- **Mobilize established organizational structures and functions.** A college or university will want to mobilize its established academic and administrative divisions, departments, and functions to commence

contingency planning for matters under their purviews. For instance, an existing academic department and faculty are best equipped to transition their course content for online or blended delivery or to design alternative approaches for clinical and field experiences for their students. In many cases, however, this means a shift in attitude and skills away from “planning as usual” to an urgency and confidence for tracking and managing uncertainties. In-service training may be required on new ways of scenario and contingency planning and decision modeling.

- **Establish cross-functional situational teams.** Many COVID-19 responses cut across the college or university. These can include institution-wide endeavors for student retention, new student orientation, alternative student life programming, or financial aid stimulus strategies. These challenges require a network of cross-functional teams that report to the command center and have clear authorization to act on behalf of the institution.
- **Launch rapid-response teams.** A college or university will need to be ready to configure and launch rapid-response teams to address new COVID-19 challenges that arise suddenly and unexpectedly. Because they operate outside established organizational channels, these teams must have clear mandates and guardrails of responsibility and authority—as well as leadership’s support in making tough decisions. Since the needs for rapid-response teams will not be entirely clear at the start of contingency planning, a college or university should develop early on a registry of faculty and staff talent that may be needed.

Everyone engaged in contingency planning has two major responsibilities: first, to collect and share *intelligence* from their institutional and professional perspectives; and second, to actively and creatively engage in the *planning ahead* for various scenarios. It is vital that the command center, at all times, encourages and engenders information sharing, collaboration, connectedness, and transparency.

2. Develop a set of COVID-19 scenarios

The command center team is responsible for leading an institutional conversation on the possible ways that the COVID-19 pandemic might play out and what recovery might look like. This is done by crafting three or four different COVID-19 scenarios, following these steps.

- **Set the time horizons.** Because higher education operates on the conventional academic year, the most likely time horizons—and scenario frameworks—will be those shown in Figure 1.
- **Delineate driving forces.** Driving forces are the most important factors that determine the future environment for higher education under the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery. For most colleges and universities, COVID-19 driving forces include public health (e.g., sheltering and containment), economic and job recovery, employment futures, technologies, state and national policies, funding for education, and public confidence. Some driving forces pertain to a specific class of institution; for instance, immigration policy and COVID-19’s global impact and travel restrictions are important for schools with larger international student populations.
- **Catalog visible trends and critical uncertainties.** Sometimes we can discern a visible or expected trend for a driving force—such as the curve for COVID-19 infections or changes in unemployment (and reemployment) rates. With a disruptive event like COVID-19, however, we often do not know a force’s future direction or impact. Will the pandemic reemerge in a second stage? Will federal or state government provide stimulus funding to higher education? Will consumer confidence in higher education change? Consequently, scenario planning should assess each driving force as to whether: a) its future and impact can be known with sufficient certainty (“a clear enough future”); b) there are a limited number of outcomes that result in a few discrete scenarios; c) there is a continuum of possibilities which do not coalesce clearly into discrete scenarios; or d) the future and outcomes are truly ambiguous.
- **Estimate degree of control, risk, and impact.** Once it has agreed upon the key driving forces and recognized their levels of certainty, the planning team can assess the degrees of control, risk, and

Figure 1

Some examples of COVID-19 scenarios which differ according to the pandemic’s duration and possible implications for higher education

Scenario 1: COVID-19 is contained in summer and business quickly returns to normal.	Scenario 2: COVID-19 recurs in fall in a second wave, impacting regions differently.	Scenario 3: The pandemic escalates into winter and a second season of outbreak.
Colleges and universities can return to a full schedule of on-ground classes and residential student programming for the fall 2020 term.	Institutions continue online instruction for fall, returning to normally scheduled courses in the spring semester.	Online instruction is mandatory for all students and faculty throughout the school year; all residential programming is cancelled.
Sample Implications: Students and families make last-minute decisions about college, uncertain about jobs and the economic future. Schools with strong endowments fund financial aid “stimulus” campaigns, leaving tuition-dependent institutions struggling to maintain enrollments.	Sample Implications: Many undergraduates sit out the semester, not wanting to lose out on the campus experience. Residential colleges grapple with how much to invest in online learning. Graduate enrollments disintegrate, especially in health professions and education.	Sample Implications: Students and families shop around for lowest-cost education, as online instruction becomes a commodity. The federal government sets up major funding to retool higher education. Job retraining becomes a significant priority as COVID-19 affects all industry sectors.

impact for each force. This analysis helps determine the priorities and focus for contingency planning.

- **Identify signals and triggers.** The institution will want to carefully monitor how a driving force evolves in real time, so that it can apprehend when a scenario is becoming dominant and prepare when to implement certain strategies and actions. This means identifying environmental signals intrinsic to each force, establishing scanning and communications routines, and determining beforehand what actions will be triggered and when.
- **Finalize and share scenario statements.** This stage of contingency planning results in succinct narratives of the three or four scenarios that the college or university believes best describe the alternative paths that the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery might take for the upcoming academic year. The scenario statements should be descriptive in their title and narratives to capture the imagination of trustees, faculty, and staff—yet sufficiently organized and detailed across the above elements to inform contingency planning. The command team disseminates and orients the school community on the scenario statements to drive connected, urgent effort.

3. Determine planning implications

Each COVID-19 scenario contains immediate implications for planning institutional operations, finances, and brand communications. They can be organized under the categories of:

- Teaching and learning
- The student experience
- Program development
- Faculty and staff allocation and development
- Finances
- Technology
- Infrastructure
- Retention and continuing enrollments
- New student marketing, recruitment, and orientation
- Tuition policy, financial aid, and net revenue management
- Auxiliary enterprises.

The command center team leads a discussion to determine the major planning implications under each scenario by asking critical questions like: What are the possible implications for retention and new student recruitment if we open fully in the fall? If our opening is delayed until spring? Or if access to our campus is restricted throughout the academic year?

Once defined, organized, and summarized, these planning contingencies can be assigned to departmental, cross-functional, and rapid-response teams so that they can design strategies and actions in response to them.

4. Share and celebrate lessons learned

Just a few weeks ago, universities, colleges, and schools across the nation had to act quickly in response to the COVID-19 spread. Many of these responses demonstrated real-time decision making and creative problem solving.

Before moving into the next stage of scenario strategy development, take an institutional moment to assess internally the performance of your school's recent COVID-19 interventions, share "lessons learned" across the college community that can inform 2020-21 preparations, and publicly celebrate your achievements. In doing so, identify what new capabilities your institution discovered or developed and what interventions can be sustained as long-term strategies. This also may be a good time to survey your students, families, educational partners, and other constituencies about their satisfaction with your COVID-19 management, interventions, and communications and to take their pulse in anticipation of the new academic year.

5. Design and trigger contingency strategies

At this stage, your college and university will be armed with a shared understanding of the various scenarios on how COVID-19 might play out. You will have examined each scenario's pertinent driving forces, uncertainties, and risks. And you will have measured possible impacts on operations, enrollments, and finances.

Now functional, cross-functional, and rapid-response planning teams are ready to conceptualize, design, and

develop the contingency strategies and activities to manage each COVID-19 scenario. It is important that the planning teams document their proposed strategies, to the extent possible, according to a common format to expedite decision making and resource allocation. It is also essential that the command center team establish an agile process for reviewing and deciding on proposed strategies and for triggering their implementation.

During this stage, the command center team will be coordinating staffing resources to support the planning teams in developing their contingency strategies. The command center prioritizes and assigns help from institutional research, administrative data systems, budgeting and finance, and administrative and instructional technologies. Staff from these areas might be formally embedded within a planning team to assist in developing specific contingency strategies.

The command center team plays a vital role for ensuring transparent, consistent, and continuous communications—horizontally across planning teams, vertically with governance bodies and throughout the decision hierarchy, and externally with students, families, and key audiences. For this purpose, a dedicated communications team within the command center devises and executes a COVID-19 response communications plan that employs the full range of traditional, digital, and social media and targets appropriate and timely messaging to the institution’s various internal and external constituencies.

6. Adapt budgeting, decision-support, and forecasting models

Most higher education budgeting and forecasting models assume high degrees of continuity from year to year, using past performance to forecast future outcomes. COVID-19 has severely disrupted the stability on which these models rely, lessening their efficacy to manage uncertainty.

Colleges and universities will want to adapt their decision-support models in three important ways to align with contingency planning.

- **Embed scenario inputs into institutional forecasting models.** Typically, forecasting models—for student enrollments, credit hour production, new student recruitment, financial aid leveraging,

program revenues, fundraising, and the like—are “deterministic.” They forecast future outcomes by manipulating internal performance variables according to incremental rates of change. To support contingency planning, however, colleges and universities need to create new sets of input variables that pertain directly to the driving forces in each COVID-19 scenario. The decision models themselves should be strengthened by adding such capabilities as: interactive “what if” querying; probability, risk, and trade-off analyses; and “back-solving” for performance optimization.

- **Construct decision-support models to test and refine specific intervention strategies.** During contingency planning, an institution will conceive a range of interventions and strategies that it believes can help manage COVID-19 scenarios. It is important to understand the outcomes, risks, and impacts of these strategies, especially when there are significant enrollment, financial, staffing, or other strategic consequences. An example: How to target tuition policies and financial aid allocations to help students and families through the COVID-19 crisis, while enhancing student loyalty, sustaining program enrollments, managing net revenues, and ensuring post-COVID-19 elasticity. Building and applying decision-support models specifically for high-impact interventions will enable institutions to refine the strategies and anticipate ahead of time their short- and long-term performance and financial consequences.
- **Transition to dynamic budgeting and resource allocation.** Colleges and universities should consider suspending the annual budgeting cycle and replace it with dynamic budgeting techniques which take shorter (e.g., 3-month) views and align with scenario contingencies and decision modeling. Rather than having a single “authorized” 2020-21 budget, a school may construct alternative budgets over the set of its COVID-19 scenarios.

Closing observation: Embrace Unsafe Thinking

In his noteworthy study of creative decision making, *Unsafe Thinking* (2018), Jonah Sachs observes that organizational cultures, as well as individuals, are

“wired” to run toward safety in the face of threats. “Ironically,” he says, “the pull of safe thinking gets strongest when we’re in unknown territory that requires new approaches.” We tend toward taking “safety-seeking action, . . . short-term fixes that we believe will hold off the threat and lower our anxiety.”

The COVID-19 pandemic is an extraordinary—some say existential—threat to colleges and universities across the nation, both for the short term and for the longer-range future of higher education (which was already in flux). COVID-19 is exposing fault lines for colleges and

universities—in general and specifically at our own individual schools.

When used insightfully, scenario and contingency planning—and its decision tools and techniques—can steer us away from “safe thinking” and toward imaginative solutions and new capabilities that we might not have envisioned during times of stability. For sure, these are stressful times, but as Sachs opines: “Teaching ourselves to be comfortable with a bit of discomfort gives us a far better chance of changing habitual patterns and opening space for new possibilities.”

About the author(s)

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