

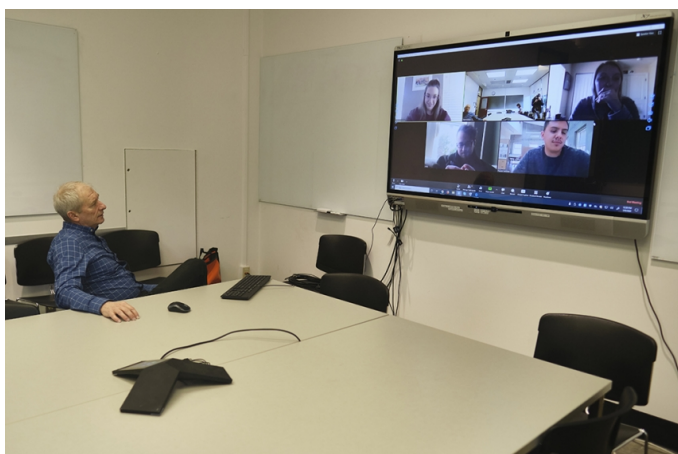
THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

TECHNOLOGY

Covid-19 Has Forced Higher Ed to Pivot to Online Learning. Here Are 7 Takeaways So Far.

By *Lee Gardner* | MARCH 20, 2020

✓ PREMIUM



Stephen Brashear for The Chronicle

Richard Mohler, an associate professor of architecture at the U. of Washington, conducts an online class.

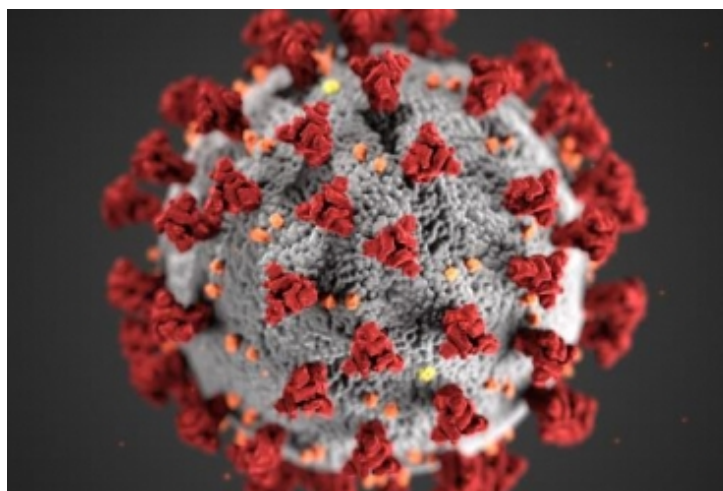
Who says academe can't be nimble? In the space of a few weeks in early March, as the Covid-19 pandemic spread, colleges across the country ditched their customary glides toward the end of the semester in exchange for closing campuses and moving all classes online.

Santa Clara University, a Jesuit institution in California, for example, has never offered online classes during its regular academic year, says Robert C. Owen, vice provost for technology and chief information officer. But when college leaders made the decision to close the campus, Santa Clara had only a brief window to “go from a university that offered no online courses to a university that offered only online courses.”

Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle's* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- [The Coronavirus Is Upending Higher Ed. Here Are the Latest Developments.](#)
- [How to Recover the Joy of Teaching After an Online Pivot](#)
- [Here's What One Campus Canceled in the Wake of the Coronavirus](#)



It's too early to tell how, or if, this mass experiment in online mobilization will work. Many institutions just started teaching remotely this week. But early lessons have already made themselves evident.

What most colleges are doing right now is not online education. When administrators and faculty members first gathered at Hampshire College, in Massachusetts, to discuss how to tackle teaching remotely, Ed Wingenbach, the president, stressed to everyone that they should not presume that they were creating online courses. Designing online instruction is a discipline backed by decades of learning science, and “a process that takes months, if not sometimes years, to do properly,” he says. “I wanted to make it clear to everybody that that’s not what we’re doing.”

What most colleges are doing right now is more like remote education, says Susan Grajek, vice president for communities and research at Educause, a nonprofit organization that advocates for technology in education. Colleges aren't putting in place well-considered, durable online-learning plans. They're throwing together quick, ad hoc, low-fidelity mitigation strategies — and that's fine, for now.

“You can think of this less as planning a big, formal party at your house and hosting 50 people. and more as having a crowd of 50 people suddenly show up at your front door hungry,” Grajek says. “In those situations, you’re limited to the stove you’ve got, the number of chairs and tables and paper plates you have, and the food and equipment that you have on hand.”

Thank God for spring break. As disruptive as the pandemic has been for colleges, the timing could have been worse. Most institutions began to face the decision about how to proceed with the rest of their semesters in the week or two before their scheduled spring breaks. Many took advantage of that, getting students off campus early and preparing themselves for online instruction.

Spring break was scheduled for last week at Juniata College, in Pennsylvania, but like many institutions, Juniata extended it to two weeks, in part to help professors prepare for online instruction, which starts this week. “We couldn’t have expected our faculty to be ready in the blink of an eye,” says James A. Troha, the president.

If remote delivery of courses continues into next semester, though, expectations will most likely increase. But the hot months may give colleges time to adapt and improve if they’re forced to contemplate resuming online classes in the fall, or keeping remote instruction handy in case the virus recedes but makes a comeback with the return of flu season.

“We’d have the time to put into the faculty development and faculty support,” says Nancy Cutler, deputy chief information officer for academic technology at Santa Clara.

Many of the tools were already at hand. Many colleges are proceeding with online instruction using their existing learning-management systems to handle assignments and course materials, and common conferencing software, like Zoom, for lectures and discussions. Institutions may have already paid for almost everything they need, says Phil Hill, an education-technology consultant and blogger, but “what’s happening now is you’re using it a lot more.”

It may be a mistake, however, to try to make everyone use a particular platform just because that’s what the institution favors, says Michael J. O’Brien, vice president for academic affairs at Texas A&M University at San Antonio. Many professors on campus

were already involved in online education, and when administrators decided to move instruction fully online, the university set up a web page that offered faculty members a limited selection of platforms they could use to teach, along with tools to help them do so. But O'Brien made clear that professors should use whatever they felt comfortable using.

"Some universities have tried to mandate that we're going to use X or Y, like Blackboard," he says. "I think that's a disaster. Get the job done, as simply as possible."

The pivot can be surprisingly cheap. A sudden scramble to shift the most essential part of a college's operations to an entirely new modality almost overnight seems as if it should be wildly costly. And yet some institutions report relatively minor expenditures, if any.

Santa Clara paid for new lecture-capture and exam-proctoring software, along with some webcams for professors who didn't have them. It all came to about \$40,000. Hampshire paid modestly for some additional Zoom licenses. Juniata paid a local consultant \$1,000 and bought a few document cameras and Wi-Fi hotspots. All came in within the college's operating budget, says Troha, the president.

In addition to handing out spare laptops to students, faculty, and staff, Texas A&M at San Antonio bought 500 Wi-Fi hotspots and ordered 500 more, to help bridge the internet-service gaps that could keep some students and faculty members offline. The hotspots themselves are inexpensive but cost about \$40 a month to run. "It's 40,000 bucks a month for the rest of the semester," O'Brien says. "We'll eat that."

This is your wake-up call. The coronavirus has made it clear that colleges must have a thorough, long-term digital strategy in place. Only 42 percent of institutions have an information-technology business-continuity plan to facilitate remote operations in the event of a disruption like a pandemic, according to Educause data.

The pandemic could change education delivery forever. ... Grajek, of Educause, sees a possible silver lining to Covid-19: "This is a time of a lot of creativity, of incubation, of new ways of doing things." By the time academe returns to whatever passes for normal,

thousands of professors who have never, or only grudgingly, taught online will have had extensive experience with a form of online instruction.

Even if the experience doesn't drive more faculty members to sign up to teach online, many who have run their classrooms the same way for decades may be exposed to more-contemporary teaching methods and concepts, says Brian Larkin, manager of instructional technology at Santa Clara: "This will pay dividends when we do return to a face-to-face environment."

At Hampshire, which has been doing some soul-searching over recent financial setbacks, President Wingenbach says that the college's short-term embrace of remote education "might open up some real opportunities for our approach to the liberal arts that we should be thinking about already."

Ultimately, Wingenbach adds, it may not be up to administrators and professors to say how colleges approach education in the future. If the current wave of online instruction is even, say, 70 percent as good as the face-to-face experience, some students and their parents may want more of it. "I don't think we can assume that the virus goes away or gets under control, and everything in higher ed goes back to normal," Wingenbach says. "You can't unsee what's happening right now."

... but it probably won't. Many forces exerted pressure on the traditional four-year, bricks-and-mortar, face-to-face campus experience before the coronavirus, and they'll still be there when the virus is conquered or goes dormant. That traditional model is in no danger of going anywhere at many institutions, including Santa Clara. The model is exactly why students come, says Owen, the vice provost, so "the idea that we would strongly pivot away from that, I don't believe would be something we would do."

For most, the sooner things get back to the way they used to be, the better. "No one, at the end of the semester, is gonna say, Hey, that was easy, let's just put a whole bunch more stuff online," says O'Brien, of Texas A&M at San Antonio. "Not gonna happen."

Lee Gardner writes about the management of colleges and universities, higher-education marketing, and other topics. Follow him on Twitter @_lee_g, or email him at lee.gardner@chronicle.com.