

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



Let's Not Return to Normal When the 'New Normal' Finally Arrives

The pandemic has revealed higher education's shortcomings.

THE REVIEW

By *Morton O. Schapiro*

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“It is easier to change the course of history than a history course.” That old line is both quite clever and quite wrong.

The image of professors' reading from their long-yellowed notes isn't one I recognize in our faculty or in myself. Our disciplines evolve, and so do we. In the course of my own pedagogical journey, which includes 42 consecutive years in the undergraduate classroom, I've adapted my teaching for several reasons.

For one, theories and methodological approaches come and go. Moreover, the interests of students change over time, and so do the most pressing policy issues affecting the nation and the world. Finally, to teach the same thing over and over again throughout a career would drive any of us crazy.

So I am confident that most faculty members already adapt their teaching to the times. And, when the global pandemic eases, I am similarly confident that the most forward-thinking colleges will seize on what we've learned over the past year to improve both their learning environments and their administrative operations. What is imperative for the future success of our sector is that the forward-thinking colleges greatly outnumber the ones that try to return to business as usual.

Faculty members and administrators will increasingly understand that flexibility should not be limited to the classroom.

At a recent Board of Trustees meeting here at Northwestern, a panel of undergraduates talked about the good and bad of Zoom teaching. The bad would not surprise you: Zoom fatigue, difficulty in getting to know classmates, and lack of opportunities for serendipitous chats with professors. But they described a surprising number of positives as well.

The students loved having classes recorded. One admitted that recordings had made it easier to sleep in and miss class, but others said that they appreciated being able to rewatch a lecture or discussion session in order to revisit points that were confusing. Another said that several of her professors had used the Zoom format to invite expert guests from all over the world to participate in classes, something that happened much less frequently when teaching was in person. Several reported that viewing professors in their living spaces — with children, partners, and pets roaming by — had made it easier in some ways to get to know them as real people.

More important, students were able to watch faculty members show how much they care during a time of great stress, anxiety, and fear. A number of students seemed to marvel that professors had taken a real interest in them as people, demonstrating flexibility with academic deadlines and requirements that in the past never would have been waived. To be sure, some students spoke of faculty members who seemed oblivious to the challenges all around us, but fortunately those complaints were rare.

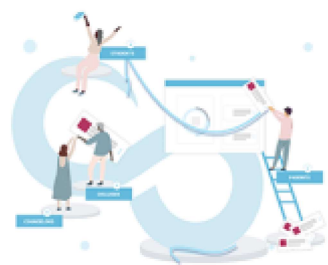
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So what does all this mean for life in the “new normal”? Colleges that embrace innovation will certainly lean on technology more readily to enhance teaching — whether by involving outsiders in instruction or by recording classes for further review. And their faculty members will recognize that, even if the pressures on students seem to abate, there is no reason to reduce the humanity they might show as teachers.

Faculty members and administrators will also increasingly understand that flexibility should not be limited to the classroom. Do we really need our staff to return to five days and 40 hours a week in the physical workplace when so many of them could

reallocate their commuting time to a more productive purpose — either in doing their jobs better or in keeping their sanity? Some portion of everything from psychological counseling to academic advising to engaging with the career center can certainly continue to be done remotely.



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The best colleges will not forget that the challenges of the pandemic and the associated economic turmoil are not independent of the problems stemming from the overdue recognition of our nation's longstanding history of racial bigotry, especially anti-Black racism. They will tap into the considerable benefits of the rapid proliferation of online approaches to antiracism, including seminars, trainings, and reading groups. Similarly, the health and economic impacts of Covid-19 on

marginalized communities cry out for researchers to study and develop policies aimed at correcting those staggering imbalances.

Finally, at those institutions where both teaching and research are important parts of their mission, the most effective leaders will see the imperative to build cross-disciplinary teams of scholars to examine the great issues of the day. For one of countless examples, colleges could foster partnerships between the scientists who develop vaccines with the social scientists who can best understand — and reduce — the reluctance in certain communities to be vaccinated.

In sum, what we have learned over the past difficult year could propel us forward as teachers, as scholars, and as administrators. It would not just be a wasted opportunity to return to business as usual; it would be an injustice.

This essay is excerpted from a Chronicle special report, “Reopening Campus: How to Do It Safely and Successfully,” [available in the Chronicle Store](#).

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