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What's next?

2020 Trends Higher Education Institutions Should Practice

Martin Baker, Managing Partner
Ken Carrick, Partner



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By any conceivable measure, 2020 was a year of change and disruption nationally, as well as globally, facing enough potentially life-altering events to last a lifetime. We have dealt with a deadly pandemic and a successive vaccination roll-out, a global social justice movement, an unusual and historic U.S. election, a stock market crash and subsequent rebound, a fluctuating economy, and deadly wildfires to name just a few examples.

Institutions of higher education were not immune to the realities of these events and the enormity of their impact. Institutions did not anticipate these global events as part of their 2020 plan, and most were thrust into some level of crisis that created multiple challenges. As students and their families grappled with the ever-changing realities of daily life, particularly in the throes of the pandemic, institutions were pushed into scenarios where quick decisions were necessary, while information was often limited. Due to the economic changes, many institutions were faced with the need to diversify their offerings to provide clear value and benefit to students. Adaptability and flexibility became the norm. Many higher education institutions, and their administrators and faculty, learned to change quickly, and many changed more in a few months than in the past decade.

What's next for higher education?

2020 brought changes to almost every industry, and higher education institutions were no exception. Institutions learned to pivot quickly, and many made substantial changes that affected students, parents, faculty, and staff. When examining the higher education sector, it is prudent for us to consider which attitudes, adaptations, and/or changes adopted or employed by educational institutions are likely to, or should, remain for some time to come. While by no means an all-inclusive list, below are a few possibilities worth contemplating.

Willingness and necessity to facilitate and embrace change, especially rapid change.

It is reasonable to assume that many faculty members, administrators, and institutions discovered that they not only could change but could do so more rapidly than they could have ever imagined. Higher education has long been built on regulations and struggled to embrace much-needed change. The events of the past year have necessitated a willingness to maintain an open mind towards the need to be nimble and responsive. This responsiveness should prove critical in meeting the future needs of multiple institutional stakeholders.



Innovation and creativity in planning, especially strategic planning.

Recent events have provided and/or forced higher education institutions the opportunity to change aspects of campus life and adjust their educational delivery, and many will benefit by establishing specific and achievable goals that will enhance each student's college experience. Institutions that employ creativity and innovation, and are willing to take prudent risks, may find themselves at the front of the pack in their ability to facilitate and embrace change.

Renewed and legitimate focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The past year has thrust diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts into the forefront of almost all industries. And while diversity, equity, and inclusion have been a focus for years, now more than ever, institutions are tasked with providing more effective strategies that produce valuable outcomes for students, faculty, and staff. We have learned that successful diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts improve racial and cultural awareness, enhance critical thinking, and provide a stronger sense of community. While diversity is often defined by ethnicity, there is also a multitude of other ways that individuals describe themselves as stakeholders of an institution. Whomever the stakeholder, and however they choose to identify, higher education has seen a renewed emphasis on making sincere efforts to ensure that all stakeholders are in a welcoming and safe environment in which to pursue all the opportunities provided. Diversity, equity, and inclusion work must be embedded in the core mission and operations of all institutions.

Realistic budgeting adjusted to fit current realities, revenue growth, and allocation of resources.

While these activities are always important, in times of uncertainty and rapid fluctuation, an up-to-date and realistic budgeting process that is tied closely with strategic priorities can be a great management tool. Special attention should be given to the revenue line and its growth potential. Few organizations cut their way to prosperity during difficult times. Good investments in innovative, creative, and demand-driven initiatives (especially academic programming and non-traditional revenue sources) consistent with strategic priorities have a much higher return than simple, and often painful, cost-cutting. However, good stewardship of resources and accountability for their use is not to be diminished.

Technology effects in the workplace and on educational delivery.

It is an understatement to say that technology use this past year changed communications, instruction, and interpersonal interaction in every aspect of institution administration and the student experience. Many of the changes we have seen and become accustomed to are likely forever changes. Institutions were quickly faced with delivering a product that meets stakeholder expectations and learning how to take advantage of more tools in the digital world. Today more than ever, relationships matter, and while human interaction should never be replaced, in some cases, this more tech-enabled environment boosted productivity and efficiency. The new realm of digital interaction has shown that a student's



academic needs can be met and for some, it has provided an opportunity for professors to offer more support, guidance, and mentoring. Employees at higher education institutions have also discovered newfound freedom and control over their work/life balance and sometimes even their work location. Institutions that continue to make the best strategic and operational use of appropriate technology, and that make prudent investments in technology resources, will lead in meeting the needs of multiple stakeholders.

Faculty and student campus experience.

It would appear that at least part of the campus experience has likely forever changed with a number of institutions moving away from some of the amenities of the campus toward the overall benefit of student services, programs, and enhanced ways to meet the needs of the workforce. As higher education institutions move forward, they will be faced with a multitude of questions that include how to alter the campus experience in a safe and meaningful way. Additionally, many institutions must ask themselves: How will the faculty/student interaction change? How many students will return to campus? Will students migrate to larger, more suburban campuses, or smaller rural campuses that provide more opportunities for open space? What, if any, is the long-term effect on intercollegiate athletics or other institutional sponsored extracurricular activities? Institutions that best understand these and other campus dynamics as they relate to their specific faculty and students will be in the best position to excel and thrive in the long-term.

How did the events of 2020 effect Higher Education?

\$120 billion

Estimated new expenses incurred and revenue lost by higher education during the pandemic.

Source: Letter to Congress from the American Council on Education, December 2020

560K

The drop in the number of undergraduates enrolled in the fall of 2020.

Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, December 2020

22%

Decrease in high school graduates attending college in the Fall 2020 compared to those in 2019.

Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, December 2020

\$24 billion

Estimated new expenses incurred by 107 top ranked colleges by U.S. News & World Report

Source: Paul N. Friga, Hello Campus, December 2020

Addressing mental health and well-being.

Mental health became a top priority for colleges and universities across the nation over the past year as more students, as well as faculty and staff, were finding the pandemic and other events taking a toll on their emotional well-being. Many students found themselves struggling with isolation and anxiety as they navigated the new landscape of mostly online learning. Higher education institutions have found themselves recognizing mental health needs go beyond providing campus counseling services and instituting courses and services that incorporate a student's overall well-being.

The need for exceptional and talented leaders, and not just in the President's/Chancellor's office.

Nothing new here. Leading a higher education institution is difficult in the best of times and even more so in times of uncertainty. With the landscape changing, institutions need talented leadership who, while respecting the traditional academy model, can provide vision and develop imaginative strategies to further the mission and accomplishments of their institution. The chaotic events of 2020 have brought about conditions that have led institutions to reexamine the necessary skills that are needed in a leader. Leaders with vision, courage, superior interpersonal skills, flexibility, and the ability to make good decisions with the information at hand will be coveted by institutions that want to thrive. Therefore, it is likely that there will be a "race to win top talent."

The higher education operating landscape has changed. Its importance has not. While the many events we have witnessed and endured have brought about challenges, they have also afforded a vast number of lessons and opportunities. Today's institutions must plan differently for the future and think about long-term strategies and solutions in an ever-changing environment. Institutions and their leaders who recognize and embrace the change will be the ones thriving as 2020 moves further back in the rearview mirror and the road to the future opens ahead.

About the Authors



Martin Baker

Managing Partner & Head of the Higher Education Practice

Martin Baker has over 22 years of experience in executive search and has worked on over 350 searches throughout his career, including conducting searches for the positions of CEO, CFO, CIO, Provost, Dean, Director, and Professor. He has recently represented a number of AAU institutions, land-grant universities, liberal arts colleges, and regional universities, where he has led numerous mid and senior level searches spanning most functions and academic disciplines. Martin earned his bachelor's degree from Wake Forest University, and he currently serves on the Athletics Advisory Council at the University. He previously served on the Board of Directors of SciWorks (The Science Center and Environmental Park of Forsyth County in Winston-Salem), both the Alumni Council and the regional selection committee for the Presidential Scholarship at Wake Forest, and the Development Committee for the Children's Museum of Winston- Salem.



Ken Carrick

Partner, Higher Education Practice

Ken has managed numerous search engagements throughout his more than 35 years as a search consultant while cultivating a diverse roster of clients in the education, retail, nonprofit, manufacturing, healthcare, and government sectors. He was a student-athlete and graduated summa cum laude with a bachelor's degree in accounting and business administration from Catawba College, and earned an MBA from Wake Forest University. Prior to joining Buffkin / Baker, he served as president of a national retained search firm with dual headquarters in New York and Charlotte. Ken currently serves as a director on the Mecklenburg County ABC Board and is a member of the North Carolina Association of ABC Boards' legislative committee. He also served two terms as a member of the Association of Executive Search Consultants (AESC)'s Americas Council board. Ken has been the President of the Catawba College Alumni Board, and on the boards of the Greenwood Genetic Center Foundation, Greater Carolina's Chapter of the American Red Cross, and Covenant Day School.