Considerations for New and Emerging Realities in Higher Ed

Dr. Amanda Lynne Smith,
SVP Academic Services and Products at Academic Partnerships

Sean Sadler,
Head of Learning Design at Academic Partnerships

Considerations for New and Emerging Realities in Higher Ed

Dr. Amanda Lynne Smith, SVP Academic Services and Products at Academic Partnerships

Sean Sadler, Head of Learning Design at Academic Partnerships

Introduction

University presidents, administrators and leadership are faced with an incredible challenge as they look to the 2020/2021 school year and beyond. Regardless of whether they choose to postpone classes in the Fall, limit the number of on-campus courses offered, stand up a low-residency model or enact any of the myriad of other options that are currently being discussed, going forward it is highly likely that colleges will need a "Plan B," or a contingency plan for equitable access, not just for tomorrow, but indefinitely.

In the pages that follow, we will work to reimagine a spectrum of equitable access and online equivalency options that live within, and expand upon, new and emerging modalities. From remote teaching to accelerated and fully online, we will work to articulate how we are moving from one stage to the next in this unprecedented paradigm shift, while offering practical solutions that help university partners navigate their approach for what some might call a "minimum viable product," or MVP, between now and the Fall. With intentional methods, the online equivalency MVP can be achieved by evaluating goals, articulating definitions, setting concise expectations, providing tailored templates, and structuring just-in-time tiered training alongside progress milestones.

These steps, thoughtfully executed across the remaining summer months, can assist universities in developing and implementing quality online contingency preparedness strategies as they lean into the 2020/2021 school year. Informed by each institution's differentiated objectives, approach to expanded access, and framework of a paradigm shift, colleges across the country have an opportunity to reconceptualize what it means to provide equitable access through online programs as they consider new and emerging realities in higher ed.
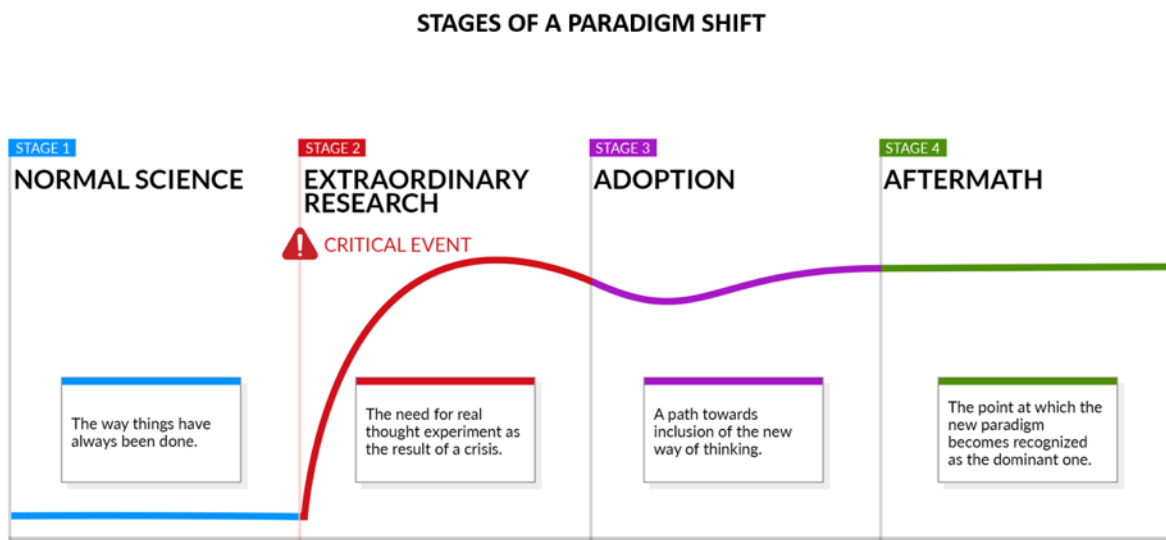
Fortitude, courage and integrity

Many colleges across the country have an epic journey ahead. Those that embrace the challenge as more than a pandemic-related contingency plan will prosper by positioning themselves more effectively to open up longer-term and more fully online options, ultimately expanding reach and inviting growth.

Thoughtful approaches to next steps will be a true differentiator for colleges in the future. Those that navigate the ambiguity with fortitude, courage and integrity will find themselves on the right side of history—serving current and non-traditional students alike in ways that advocate for change, uplift industry and amplify untapped possibility for our country and world.

Higher education has never before had quite the vantage point as it does right now: the ability to choose where and how to begin while navigating a myriad of evolving definitions and pedagogies as it looks toward a horizon of change. Deliberate and coordinated steps taken now can ultimately provide university leaders with practical approaches to implementing fully online programs in the future. These programs may be designed to provide more access, affordability and workforce relevance to reach greater numbers of students—while also ensuring competitiveness and the longevity of the institution.

The image below illustrates the stages of a paradigm shift and may be helpful for those in higher education to visualize how current and future events related to online equivalency and equitable access are unfolding.

STAGES OF A PARADIGM SHIFT

STAGE 1
NORMAL SCIENCE
The way things have always been done.

STAGE 2
EXTRAORDINARY RESEARCH
⚠ CRITICAL EVENT
The need for real thought experiment as the result of a crisis.

STAGE 3
ADOPTION
A path towards inclusion of the new way of thinking.

STAGE 4
AFTERMATH
The point at which the new paradigm becomes recognized as the dominant one.

In the throes of extraordinary research

Higher education, and perhaps education in general, needs new language and practical steps as fundamental and philosophical foundations are challenged in the pivot to address new realities. In the stages of a paradigm shift, this moment in time calls for *extraordinary research*, or the creation and experimentation of new theories and a willingness to try anything, to express explicit discontent, and to debate over the philosophical and fundamental in order to envision and weather the changing tide.

Weighted by entrenched and established systems of decentralization and traditional on-campus learning, many colleges across the country were caught off guard by the pandemic of 2020. As COVID-19 took the country and world by storm, some hypothesized that colleges whose on-campus faculty largely worked autonomously and/or whose online operations were managed separately from integrated campus functions may have struggled to institutionalize campus-wide plans to stand up sustainable contingency preparedness plans. Three months ago, these now known realities were only assumptions, but as we look toward the Fall semester and beyond, the discrepancies have become greater.

Mirroring the chasms, college students and parents alike look to the coming school year with trepidation. Although perhaps forgiving of the spring semester's attempts at delivering lectures via video conferencing tools, high price tags attached to college education will mandate that universities demonstrate a comparatively high-quality online learning experience should they choose to deliver instruction remotely for the Fall. Administrators like Dr. David May, provost of Eastern Washington University, began anticipating what the future might look like during the early stages of COVID. At an Academic Partnerships organized university roundtable held in March of this year, David said, "One thing we've decided is that students are going to come out of the other side of this demanding more options, more flexibility—the ability for an on-campus student to say, 'My mom just got sick so I have to go home and take care of her,' or 'My dad lost his job, so I have to get a job.' Students will need to be able to step from face-to-face into online asynchronous modalities when unforeseen circumstances occur."

On the other side of the house, faculty and administrators are experiencing increased anxiety knowing that a lack of preparation has spotlighted inabilities to provide a quality learning experience, regardless of circumstance. All of this points to the possibility of declining enrollment, the issuance of refunds and increasing withdrawals in conjunction with declining revenues for the upcoming school year. This is especially true for those institutions that aren't classified as a flagship, and thus may not have access to major donors and strong alumni support.

What's at stake?

Although institutions of higher education across sectors stand to benefit from a thoughtful approach to what lies ahead, it may be critically important—in particular for decentralized regional public state universities—to map next steps carefully. In the very near future, student selection criteria for a preferred college experience may include having equitable access to flexible, high-quality online course content. It is likely that universities who are prepared to meet the new and transforming consumer demands will maintain, if not grow enrollments. Those who are not may lose degree seekers to other schools and sectors.

Take a moment to consider these facts: Public four-year schools make up only 17% of all higher education institutions and yet they hold 45% of all college enrollments. Equally disproportionate is their under-representation in the fully online program market, compared to

their share of overall enrollment. According to IPEDS data, 9% of students enrolled in a public state school are exclusively enrolled in distance education courses, as compared to 25% of students from the private and for-profit sector. Further, where online programs do exist within the state-institution space, online operations tend to be decentralized, (e.g. separately managed from integrated, on-campus functions) which in turn can delay or hinder the ability to institutionalize effective decision-making or standardize best practices.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that although public four-year schools are inclusive of nearly half of all of America's college students, they've struggled to pivot in the face of what many have deemed an unprecedented education paradigm shift, while perhaps having the greatest responsibility to do so.

Due to the traditional focus on face-to-face campus programs, public universities (Garrett, Legon, & Fredericksen, 2020):

- are less likely to have trained their faculty on technology and the LMS;
- may not have policies and procedures in place for requiring faculty to work with instructional designers when developing online courses;
- are likely to have fewer courses online;
- may not require students to take an online orientation if enrolling in an online program;
- are likely to not have the infrastructure needed to launch or maintain enterprise online programs; and
- are likely to opt out of working with an online program management company or do so in a decentralized manner—i.e. serving only select programs or certain schools within the university.

For those institutions offering online programs already, we might anticipate an acceleration of program launches in areas of the university where online operations currently exist. Although this will inevitably serve some students, this approach does not have the reach or resourcing to serve the campus where enterprise instances of online equivalency plans are needed.

As we look to the coming school year, it is evident that transformative approaches will be required along with clear and delineated pathways to achieve them.

Articulating goals and emerging definitions

Before administrators and university leaders can assist with implementing online equivalency strategies, a common vocabulary is needed to define what these new realities are—and what they aren't.

Indeed, new and emerging definitions are perhaps one of the greatest challenges. The terms "face-to-face," "online" and "blended," for instance, don't do justice to the language that is required to navigate the spectrum of models that are emerging under the umbrella of what we'll refer to as "online equivalency." Online equivalency includes everything from remote

teaching to *hyflex* and can be used to determine what types of development strategies are needed in direct relationship to the university's appetite for contingency preparedness.

In order to further reconceptualize definitions and develop plans for where to start, it's equally important to think about goals. The goals of the program, its audience and its degree of flexibility are the true differentiators and can help to inform the scope and strategy related to each new and emerging opportunity.

In the spirit of thought experiments, try these on for size:

Face-to-Face:
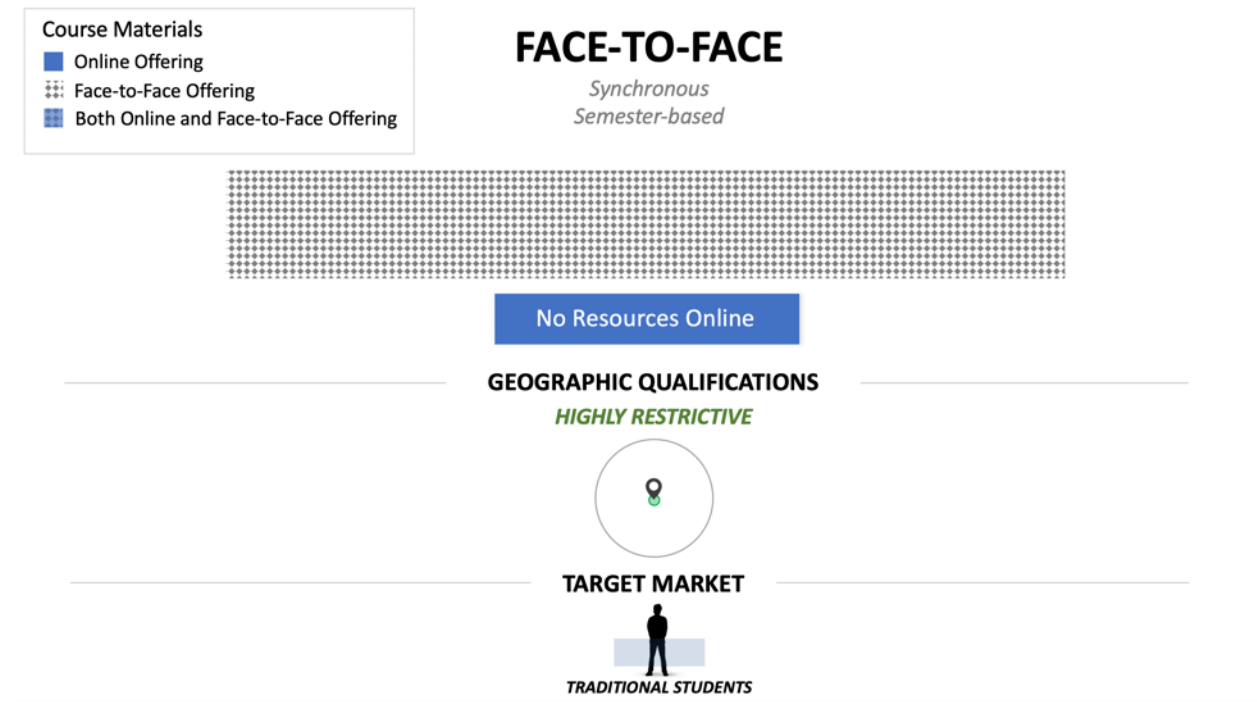
Traditional face-to-face course activity has geographical restrictions and is largely aimed at attracting traditional college students.

Goals for the university may include reaching local, first-time college students seeking a traditional on-campus experience tailored to individual interests with inter/extracurricular activities. For the campus itself, face-to-face program offerings may have helped historically to nurture culture, brand and reputation related to sports, clubs and social organizations.

Semester-based Online or Accelerated, Fully Online:
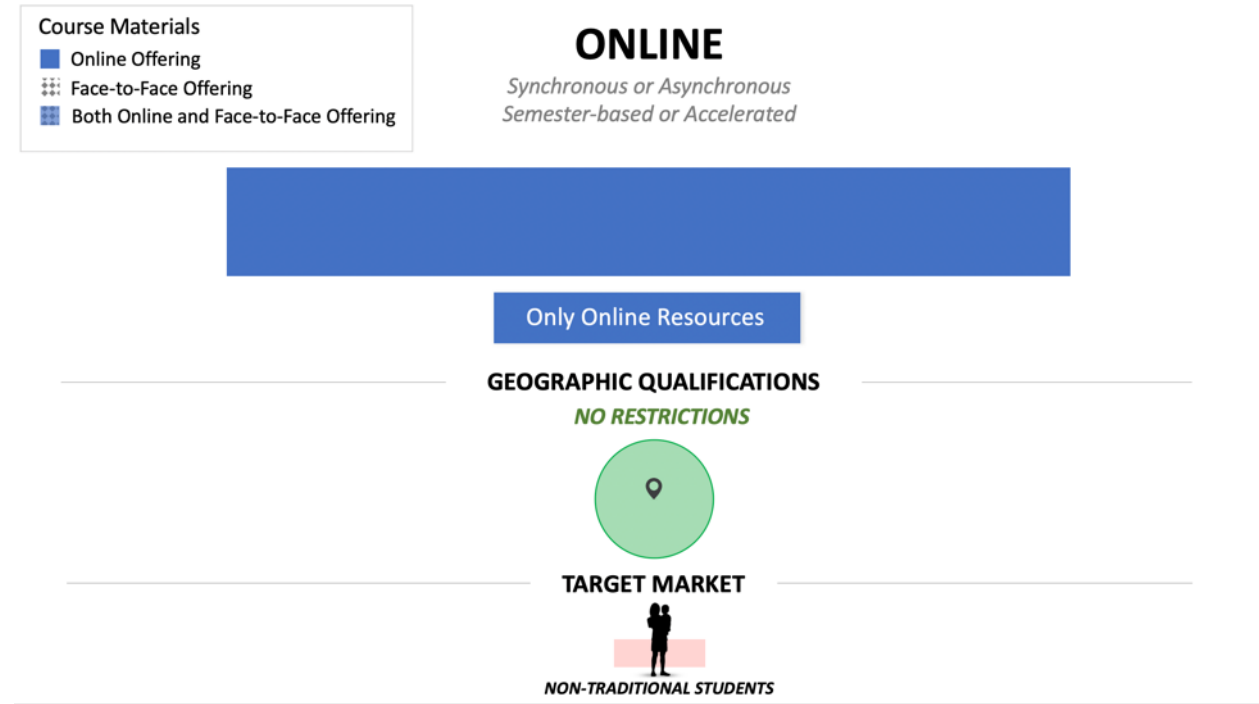
Fully online and asynchronous course activity has no geographical restrictions and is largely aimed at attracting non-traditional college students. Goals for the university may include reaching a large segment of non-traditional, working professionals and/or degree completers.

Accelerated models offer even greater flexibility, affordability and a competitive advantage for campuses interested in further promoting growth across a wider geographical area. To quantify the opportunity: Of the estimated eighteen million degree-seekers, nearly seven million are considered non-traditional and therefore more likely to enroll in a top-quality, affordable, accelerated and workforce-relevant fully online program.

Hybrid or Blended Learning:
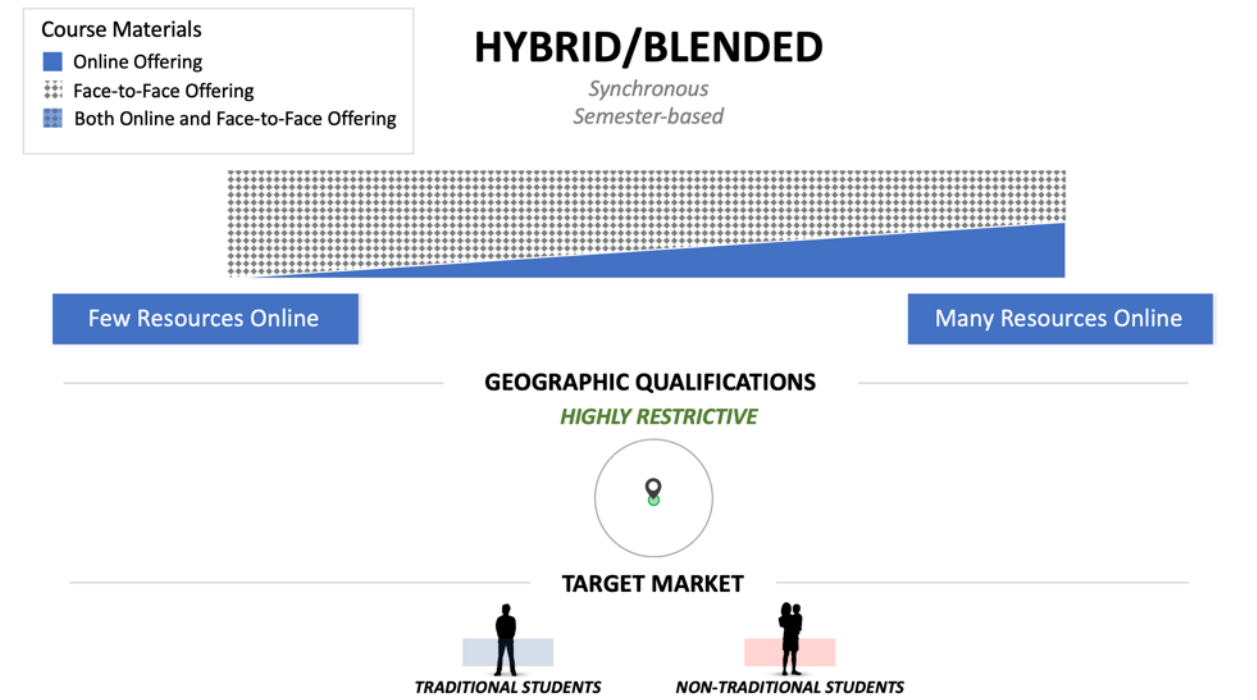
Traditional definitions of hybrid or blended learning include coursework being delivered between two modalities, with a wider range of resources being provided online. This delivery modality requires some degree of on-campus participation and tends to attract both traditional and non-traditional students living near or off campus, thus narrowing a geographic segment.

Goals for the university are likely to include reaching local students who are looking for more flexibility in the format of their college program. Traditional hybrid content, which often includes didactic material and/or assessments offered online coupled with on-campus requirements such as applied learning or group activities and lab work, can help students balance work and schooling while also potentially offering the university an opportunity to leverage efficiencies related to campus infrastructure and resources.

Online Equivalency:

Now, let's talk about online equivalency.

The concept of online equivalency—also referred to as equitable access through online learning—does not easily fit into one of the three buckets we are so familiar with; it is not face-to-face, fully online blended or hybrid. Instead, it occurs on a spectrum that is informed by the degree to which the campus is committed to contingency preparedness.
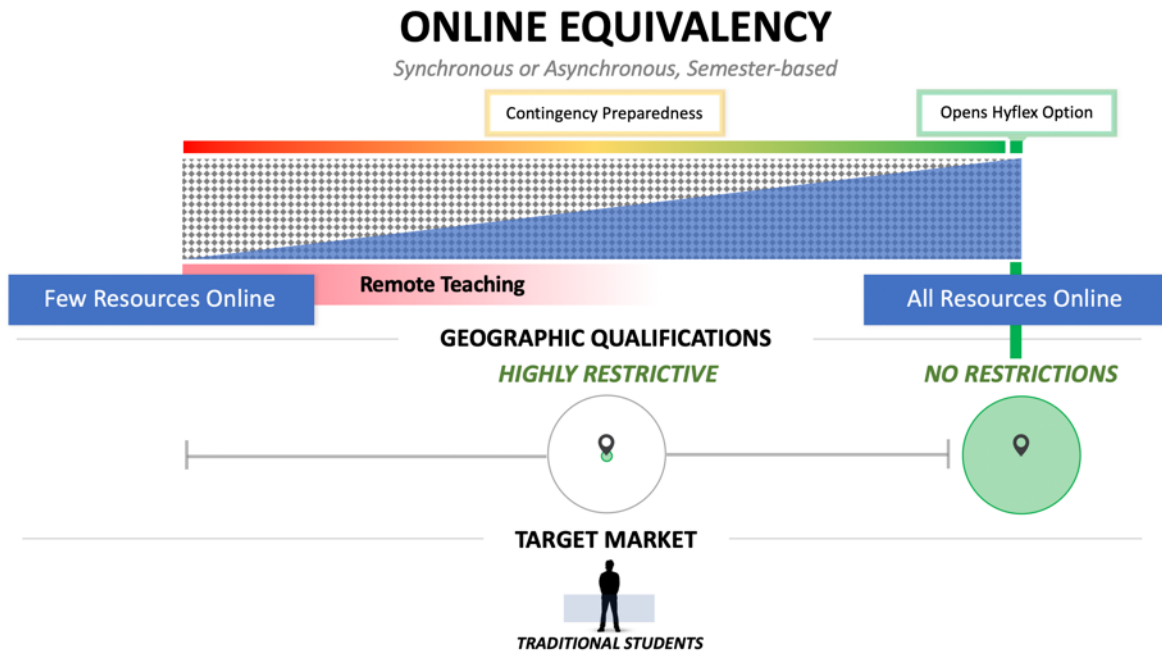
Look to the image above. On the lower end, most of the content is intended to be delivered face-to-face with few resources online. This, coupled with a heavy focus on synchronous sessions, is where you might categorize "remote teaching," a term widely used in recent months. An analogy that might be helpful is to think of remote teaching as a spare tire: You don't want to go too fast or too far, but using the spare tire does serve as an important step in getting to a place where longer-term, sustainable plans can be made.

As online equivalency increases, contingency preparedness does as well, ensuring that more, and in some cases all, traditional face-to-face content includes an online equivalent. For instance, as delivery strategies evolve from virtual synchronous lectures to pre-recorded asynchronous activities, the model shifts from remote teaching towards hyflex.

Hyflex, a term coined by Dr. Brian Beatty (2007), can be found at the other end of online equivalency in that it offers the greatest degree of flexibility for on-campus students and faculty in addressing unforeseen circumstances. In this model, students can, at their discretion, choose to come to campus for face-to-face instruction some days or go online for others. Under current circumstances and in response to COVID-19, universities may deliver hyflex with some

variation. Unlike hybrid or blended learning, which provide clear requirements for both online learning and on-campus instruction, hyflex in its traditional format places the choice of modality in the student's hands.

In general, online equivalency and its associated spectrum of contingency preparedness is first and foremost intended to meet the needs of students who have opted into an on-campus program and who are likely located on or near campus. However, as a university's contingency preparedness plans increase, with more resources offered online, the university is better positioned to offer fully online (asynchronous) programs and thus reach more students in later stages of implementation. Comprehensive accelerated online models further promote growth opportunities by reaching yet an even greater market segment of non-traditional students seeking highly flexible, quality, affordable, workforce-relevant online programs.

In sum, clear definitions and thoughtful planning at early stages of online equivalency can help to align short-term contingency preparedness needs with longer-term goals for growth through online programs.

A practical approach for where to begin

As colleges and universities are finalizing plans for Fall 2020, universities are hard at work determining where and how to begin. Traditional on-campus faculty, understaffed instructional design teams and well-intentioned administrators are scrambling to stand up variations of online learning, almost overnight. You might call this approach online moonshine, as campus faculty—whose craft is subject matter expertise, not instructional design or online teaching and learning—stumble across a foreign landscape of learning management systems, course shells and third-party applications in the name of equitable access.

Asking faculty to become instructional designers without training and professional development is like asking an engineer to perform surgery without having gone to medical school. Thoughtfully designed tools and deliberate steps are required to transfer face-to-face content to an online modality in a high-quality way.

As administrators look for where to begin in this unmarked journey, they might:

> a) aim to define the minimum viable product and/or minimum expectations of the faculty-designer based on the college's contingency preparedness plans, while based also on the university's goals for longer-term growth; or

> b) facilitate tiered training that helps faculty design and teach online courses in alignment with the university's goals related to contingency preparedness and beyond.

Also for consideration is the way that varying degrees of online equivalency and contingency preparedness may potentially force the hand of a decentralized institutional landscape. Faculty, instructional designers, faculty trainers, technology specialists and administrators alike are having to identify transformative ways of partnering across the campus to turn the proverbial

ship. In doing so, perhaps for the first time in history, higher education may find new and common vocabulary related to a spectrum of modalities—and the tools, technology and collaboration needed to bring those modalities to fruition.
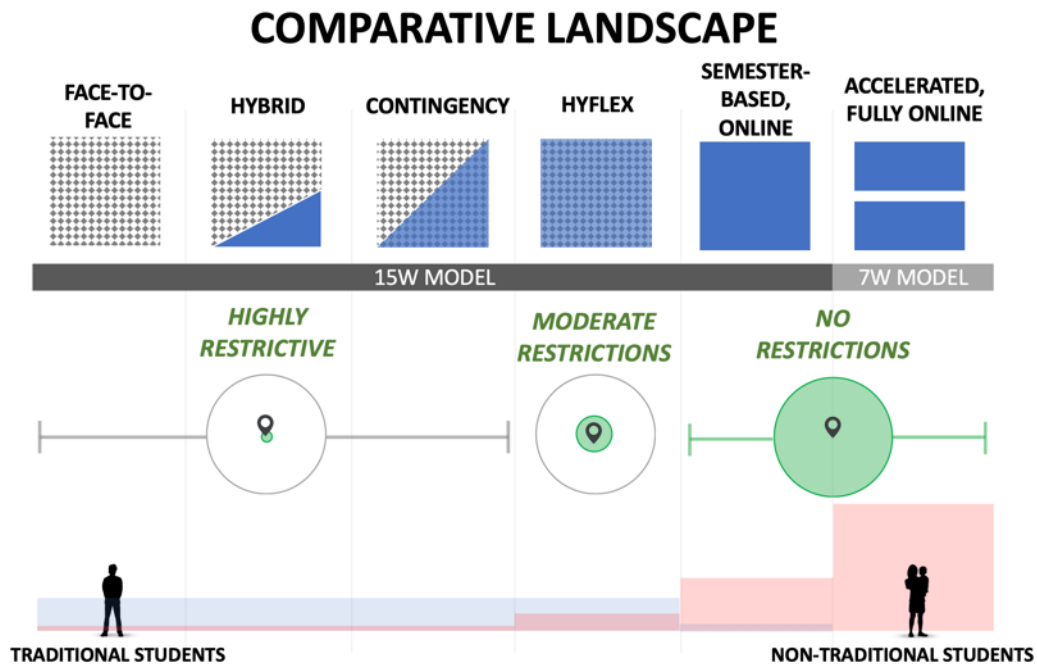
Look to the image above. As administrators aim to navigate this shifting landscape, it is valuable to consider how each modality (or variation on modality) carries with it its own unique set of goals and attributes related to delivery model, geographic considerations and target market. Designed deliberately, with clear definitions and strategies that support where and how to begin, one modality lends itself to the next, expanding in its wake access to larger segments of non-traditional, degree-seeking, college-ready students.

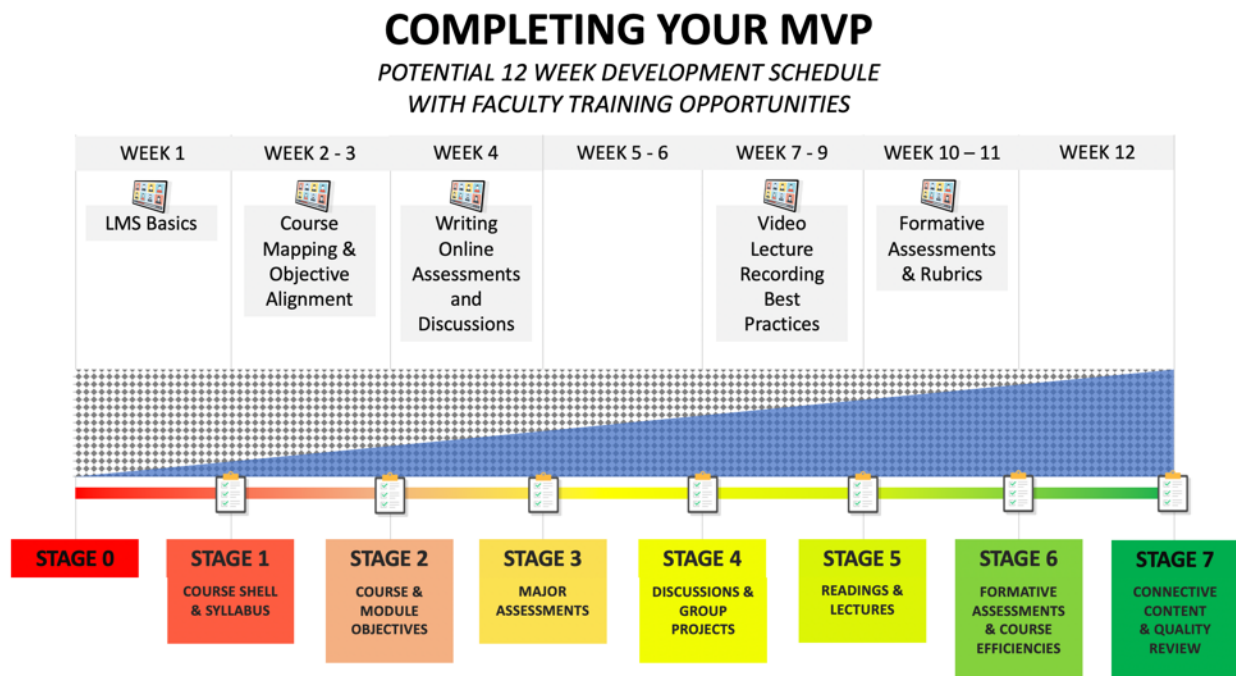### A) Defining design essentials and the minimum viable product

Once definitions have been clarified and administrators have made decisions regarding the degree to which their college aims to stand up contingency preparedness plans and thus the associated goals related to how online learning will be leveraged (perhaps in the short and longer term), it is then much easier to define the online minimum viable product (MVP) and the associated expectations of faculty.

The concept of an MVP is a common practice across business and industry. Essentially it is an approach to product development that enables an initial product offering to be made available, knowing that additional enhancements will be made over time and as a part of an iterative process.

For the university, the concept of an MVP can serve as a starting point for faculty and administrators alike. At a juncture where time, resources and know-how are scarce, the MVP can prove a practical way of getting from Point A to Point B (and, at a later date, Points C and D) as seamlessly as possible. In its simplest form, for higher education an MVP can help to mitigate perceptions that all face-to-face content needs to "go online" overnight. Instead, the MVP allows for stages of development and iterative enhancements as faculty approach online equivalency, one step at a time.

There are several ways to go about developing an MVP and supporting faculty in the process. As an example, Academic Partnerships introduced AP Off Campus following higher education's initial emergency response to COVID-19. The toolkit was designed to meet on-campus faculty where they were as colleges began to grapple with the notion that contingency preparedness plans may be needed for the 2020/2021 school year and beyond. Comprising both administrator and faculty-facing resources, the AP Off Campus toolkit was aimed at helping to support universities in developing sustainable, high-quality online equivalency experiences for their on-campus students, including the ability to quickly move back and forth between classroom and online instruction as needed.

The graphic below provides one potential approach to the MVP and illustrates how clearly defined core milestones, structured around development best practices, can be applied in the creation of contingency-preparedness courses.

COMPLETING YOUR MVP
POTENTIAL 12 WEEK DEVELOPMENT SCHEDULE
WITH FACULTY TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

WEEK 1	WEEK 2 - 3	WEEK 4	WEEK 5 - 6	WEEK 7 - 9	WEEK 10 – 11	WEEK 12
LMS Basics	Course Mapping & Objective Alignment	Writing Online Assessments and Discussions		Video Lecture Recording Best Practices	Formative Assessments & Rubrics	

STAGE 0	STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4	STAGE 5	STAGE 6	STAGE 7
	COURSE SHELL & SYLLABUS	COURSE & MODULE OBJECTIVES	MAJOR ASSESSMENTS	DISCUSSIONS & GROUP PROJECTS	READINGS & LECTURES	FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS & COURSE EFFICIENCIES	CONNECTIVE CONTENT & QUALITY REVIEW

For colleges across the country, a deliberate approach to the MVP not only provides an initial path to online equivalency but can also ensure that universities are able to offer a more

sustainable and flexible instructional model for the next semester and beyond—one that can quickly adapt to public health guidance and other fast-moving events.

B) Facilitating training that meets institutional goals and expectations

An additional recommendation to administrators is that they couple the goals of online equivalency and the clearly stated expectations of faculty with tiers of professional development that meet faculty at their current state of expertise.

Meeting faculty where they are is imperative to ensuring adoption as faculty-designers begin their journey of moving some or all of their face-to-face content online, based on the scope of the university's contingency preparedness plans. Training and professional development is best structured only after institutional goals have been clearly set and faculty expectations clearly defined. From there, tiered approaches to professional development and training can take place, ensuring that the needs of both the faculty and the university are met.

Although training opportunities vary by institution, frequently requested topics related to online equivalency, contingency planning and delivering equitable access may include: synchronous vs asynchronous delivery strategies, designing for academic integrity, considerations for STEM and the Studio Arts in online learning, online assessment practices, delivery of large lecture format courses online, benefits of the online course template, and accessibility practices—just to name a few. Ultimately, the refinement of topics and training materials will be driven by the specific needs and associated goals of the university as well as its its faculty and the needs of the students that together they serve.

Real-world applications

The practical application of the MVP, tiered faculty support strategies and offerings such as AP Off Campus have thus far been effective for a forward-thinking group of universities working to refine online equivalency plans for the coming school year.

- Louisiana State University Shreveport recognized that asking faculty to take face-to-face class content and produce a high-quality student learning experience in an online environment, without giving them the tools to do so, would be unfair to both parties. In support of this approach Dr. Julie Lessiter, the vice chancellor of strategic initiatives at LSUS, said, "As an institution we have an ethical obligation to ensure a quality learning environment that is accessible to all; to do that we must establish a basic set of expectations that describe the parameters of an online course, and more importantly we must provide faculty with the tools to meet these expectations."
- Leadership and administrators at the University of Illinois Chicago were quick to get out front when the COVID crisis began. With strong support from the provost, UIC introduced common course templates anchored in MVP concepts and coupled with intensive training to hundreds of faculty in preparation for offering an online equivalent of large lecture courses for the fall. The university went a step further by then bolstering

these strategies with ongoing course-build support and faculty mentors to help those new to online teaching create quality courses. The University has not yet determined how this large group of faculty now trained in creating synchronous and asynchronous online classes will utilize this information in the future.

- St. Thomas University, a faith-based private university located in Miami Gardens, Florida, has encouraged systematic faculty development via a variety of advising, mentoring and teaching strategies. One example is the customized adoption of AP's Off Campus offering that highlights the MVP, emerging definitions and staggered stages of development. Additionally, after 50+ years and a successful late Spring 2020 online migration in response to COVID-19, STU has transformed their traditional Fall face-to-face new student orientation for freshmen into a digital course format in Canvas. Thus far, the new digital undergraduate student orientation is yielding a higher freshman show and completion rate. The digital orientation introduces and further engages new students; prepares them for a new, digital course reality; and provides the keystrokes needed to navigate the unfolding academic landscape.

These are just a few examples of how institutions are making strides in rapid—but thoughtful—approaches to contingency preparedness while simultaneously paving the way toward longer-term online plans and growth goals through methodical strategies that support faculty and students alike.

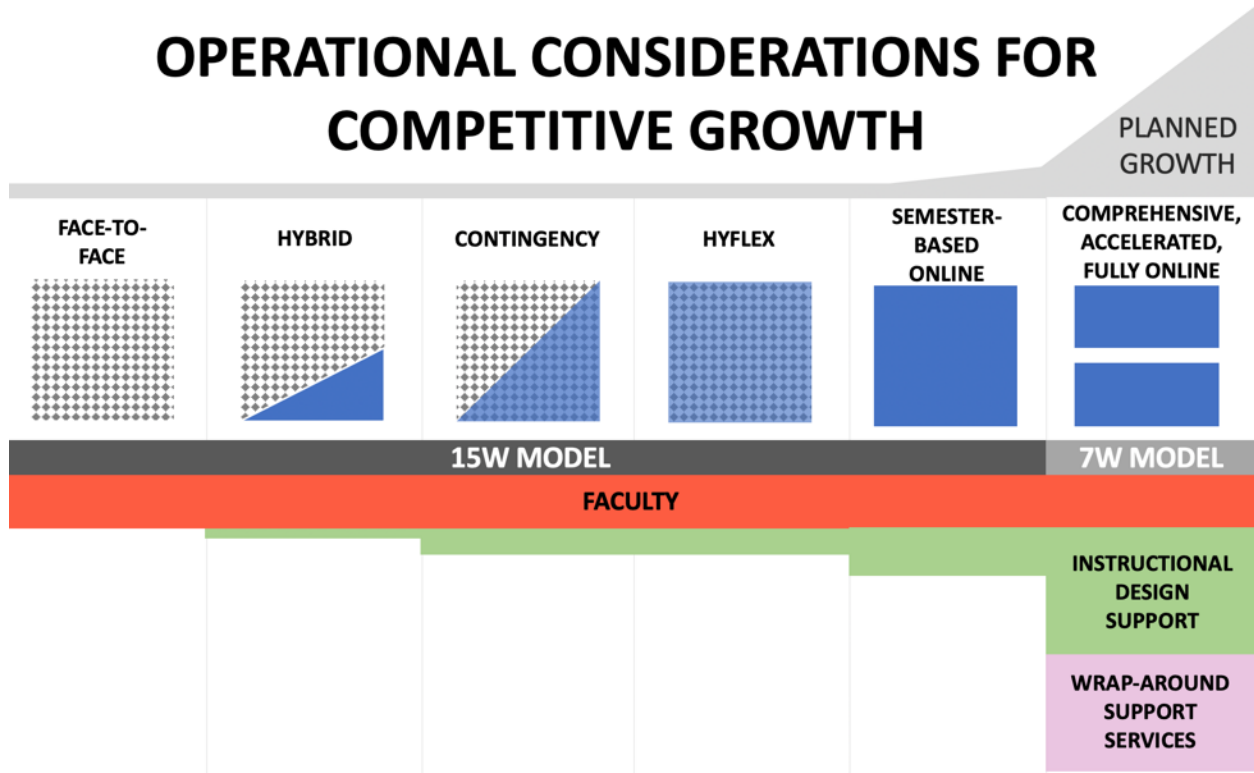### *Recommendations and considerations for new realities*

With so many unknowns in front of us, we should note that the end stages of this paradigm shift are already clearly in focus. It is therefore important to acknowledge that:

 a) higher education, generally speaking, was unprepared to respond to one of the most unprecedented events in decades;

 b) that as a result, colleges and universities need practical strategies for defining, developing and implementing models of online equivalency on a spectrum of contingency preparedness now and in the future; and

c) in this process, university leaders and online administrators have a unique opportunity to determine their starting points, or *their MVPs*, in relation to longer-term goals pertaining to enrollment growth, geographical considerations and student demographics.

The clarification of short- and long-term goals ranging from preliminary remote teaching initiatives to enterprise-wide, comprehensive, accelerated online program offerings presents with it an opportunity to discuss associated operational considerations, infrastructure needs and overarching measures of success. It is recommended that universities exploring institution-wide implementations of contingency preparedness do so while also examining opportunities for more centralized decision-making, integrated online resourcing and management,

optimized instructional design support, and curated approaches to systematized faculty training.

Consider the image below. As goals broaden from remote teaching, to contingency preparedness, to semester-based online, and/or to accelerated fully online, operational support and services will need to expand as well. The move from semester-based online to a highly competitive, accelerated, fully online model, for instance, requires a comprehensive approach including extensive academic program planning, best-in-class online pedagogy, wide-ranging and intensive faculty development, and wrap-around student support services.

OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMPETITIVE GROWTH

PLANNED GROWTH

FACE-TO-FACE	HYBRID	CONTINGENCY	HYFLEX	SEMESTER-BASED ONLINE	COMPREHENSIVE, ACCELERATED, FULLY ONLINE

15W MODEL					7W MODEL

FACULTY

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN SUPPORT

WRAP-AROUND SUPPORT SERVICES

Regardless of where universities are today—or where they plan to go in the future—in response to these unprecedented times, one thing is certain. With every passing day, increased numbers of students are seeking a top-quality, affordable, workforce-relevant education to help further their professional goals and aspirations. Prior to COVID-19, many traditional, first-time college students sought this through a brick-and-mortar campus experience. Faced with uncertainty as the fall semester approaches, some portion of the traditional on-campus student body may now join the seven million non-traditional, degree-seeking students who are actively looking for a flexible, accelerated and fully online program that ensures a quality college experience, *no matter the circumstance.*

As universities determine their starting points—leaning into new and emerging definitions, variations on modality, deliberate design concepts like the MVP, and tiered approaches to

training on-campus faculty—they have an opportunity to simultaneously assess longer-term goals and online strategies that expand their core mission in the name of reaching and serving greater numbers of college-ready students.

Sources:

Beatty, B. (2007a). *Transitioning to an Online World: Using HyFlex Courses to Bridge the Gap*. In C. Montgomerie & J. Seale (Eds.), Proceedings of ED-MEDIA 2007--World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia & Telecommunications (pp. 2701-2706). Vancouver, Canada: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE). Retrieved April 5, 2019 from https://edtechbooks.org/-ohe.

Garrett, R., Legon, R., & Fredericksen, E. E. (2020). CHLOE 4: Navigating the Mainstream, The Changing Landscape of Online Education. 2020. Retrieved from the Quality Matters website: qualitymatters.org/qa-resources/resource-center/articles-resources/CHLOE-project

Kuhn, T.S. (2015). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

National center for education statistics. *IPEDS Integrated postsecondary education data system*. Retrieved June 02, 2020, from https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2019). *CTEE Fall 2019 Report*. Retrieved from https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Fall_2019.pdf.

Today's Students. (n.d.) Retrieved from https://higherlearningadvocates.org/policy/todays-students/. Accessed 29 May 2020