Preserving Learning Environments Amidst COVID-19

How will Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) adapt its public spaces to meet the new demands of COVID-19?

By: Caitlyn Schlaudecker & Christina Filippini

While the return to campus is inevitable in the coming semesters, several aspects of the college experience will shift to accommodate the recent demands of COVID-19. Higher education institutions will have to rethink the way students interact and learn while maintaining social distancing protocols. This will affect campus living, dining, learning, social gatherings, sports, etc. However, this chapter will focus entirely on how learning environments will shift amid COVID-19.

Seminars

Seminars usually involve small classroom environments that are based around discussion. A common seminar layout includes a conference-like scenario where students sit around a large table for discussion. Amidst the ongoing pandemic, universities and colleges might provide larger spaces for seminars, such as classrooms or event spaces. While there is talk around online alternatives, small seminars are flexible and more likely to be accommodated with the necessary space for in-person discussions.

Lecture Halls

A typical lecture hall can accommodate up to 100% capacity, seating hundreds of students. However, during the coronavirus pandemic, lecture halls should only operate at about 25-35% capacity. This means staggered seating at each row with 3 empty seats between every student. These needs are less likely to be met by institutions simply due to a lack of available resources. Typically lecture halls are used for general education courses or intro courses, and can be shifted to an online platform. In order to preserve the previous learning environment, colleges and universities must provide a virtual learning experience that is easily accessible, adaptable, affordable, and engaging. It is important that students remain connected and motivated to their studies.
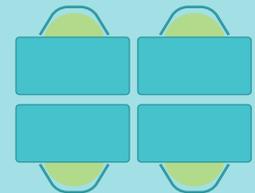
Classrooms

Project-based learning will change considerably as a result of the organizational demands of classrooms and desks; for example, studios and laboratories that require collaborative learning will drastically shift to fit the needs of new space protocols. In turn, this will affect the way students learn in a collaborative environment. Instead of organizing desks into pods that cater to collaboration, universities will have to opt for safer classroom set-ups. All seats and desks will have to face forward and provide a minimum of 36 sq. ft. per student. As a result, classrooms will only accommodate about 40-50% capacity compared to the typical 100%.
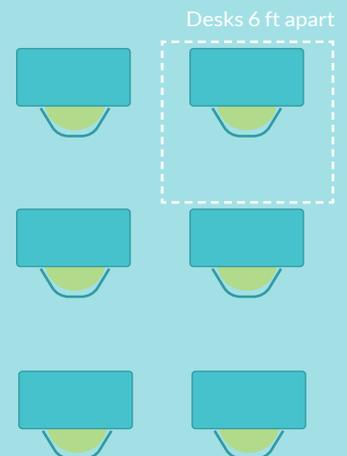
Safe Learning

Students must wear masks

Rethinking group learning

Desks 6 ft apart

In addition, studios and labs provide students with certain space and equipment that is needed for that specific course and its requirements. Students need access to these spaces in order to complete their required coursework. Instead of opting for a semester that is completely online, colleges and universities can offer a hybrid of online and in-person learning. This will maximize efficiency, while helping students remain safe and healthy.

Campus Libraries

As we face tragedy, libraries will play an important role in the recovery of campus life. They offer all students free access to tools and resources and serve as one of the last free public spaces for people to gather. However, to stay true to their mission in serving colleges and universities, they have to adapt. In the past, libraries have found success in maintaining flexibility and continually adjusting and adapting to the needs of students. Campus libraries have transitioned from a space that primarily houses books into a vibrant hub likely to house cafes, maker spaces, labs, and community rooms for clubs and meetings. They are constantly finding new ways to best serve the campus community.

Considering the threat of an ongoing pandemic, in which person-to-person interaction is the riskiest indoors, libraries are shifting their services to a virtual space and exploring new avenues to bring students together. University libraries should look to public libraries and note the changes they have already made. For example, the New York Public Library has found the transition to online offerings quite smooth as they have been investing in the digital community for years. They have replicated the experience of a library through providing online story times, tutoring, virtual book clubs, author talks, book discussion podcasts, reference librarians, and much more. They have found great success with an 864% increase in digital library card sign-ups and a 200% increase in new users across all e-reading platforms. It is clear that libraries must invest in digital technologies to provide broad access to all resources.
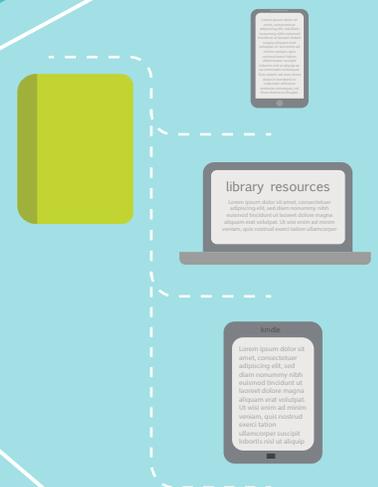
In addition to virtual spaces, libraries are providing creative ways to bring students an interactive experience. Before the pandemic, Los Angeles Public Library was working on launching the "Street Fleet" - vans equipped with maker studios, computers and tools like 3-D printers and sewing machines to park at schools and promote STEAM education (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics). Their use would address the digital divide and provide internet access for those in need.
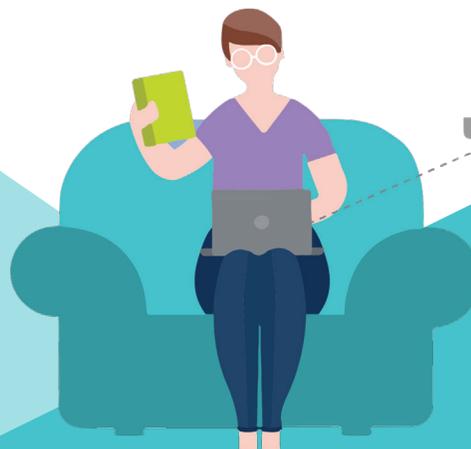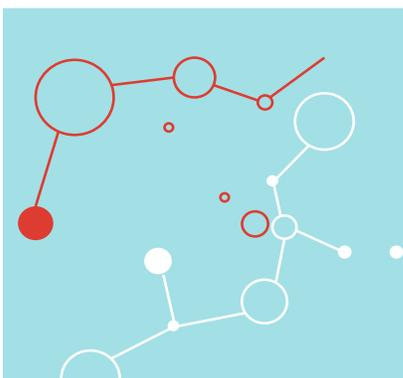
Flexible Learning

Libraries will transition to a virtual platform and move several resources online.

Example Resources:
Digital books
Podcasts
Online tutoring
Online tech support
Online tech check-out

library resources

Classroom and library learning shifts to an online platform

In the next phases of reopening, campus libraries will take many precautions including limiting the number of people allowed inside and holding books for up to 72-hours after they are returned before relending them. We may also see signage reminding those to socially distance and wear masks. Some are also moving their focus towards finding the best use of outdoor space, a great alternative that is often underutilized. For example, having makeshift computer labs or even outdoor study spaces.

Closing Thoughts

Human interaction, as many of us have found during this pandemic, is essential to growth, and our learning environments help provide such interaction. It is important that our Institutions of Higher Education remain open to ideas and innovations in order to preserve and maximize student interaction and learning. After the threat of COVID-19 is contained, our communities will gather, and our colleges and universities will bring us together as they did once before. The tools and infrastructure they implement now will change the way we view learning and must continually adapt to meet change.

Maintaining Human Connection