How Universities Are Meeting COVID-19 Challenges

Ex Libris campusM customer surveys reveal how institutions have responded to the pandemic so far — and how they're looking ahead to next year

In May 2020, Ex Libris conducted a series of web-based meetings and video conferences with more than 20 campusM customers around the world. In these conversations, we sought to understand the key changes that institutions have made as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, and what they anticipate the future of learning and campus life will look like moving forward. The following document provides a summary of these discussions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Current situation

At the time of this writing, the vast majority of institutions had closed their campus to students and all but nonessential staff. Classes have moved online, and a range of technologies were being used to deliver educational services, with the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)/Learning Management System (LMS) becoming the hub of digital learning.

Institutional leaders are confident that they have the tools and processes to adapt and address current short-term challenges but are concerned about the future in 2021 and beyond.

Challenges going forward

Institutions are preparing to face many challenges in the weeks and months to come. Compounding these challenges are the number of unknowns about how the virus might continue to spread.

Leaders are focusing on how to deliver effective teaching and learning and support student needs, as well as working out the logistics of a campus that must function within social distancing guidelines. There are also significant questions about sustainability and how leaders can ensure the long-term viability of their institutions in these unprecedented times.

How campusM can help

campusM is a leading provider of mobile apps and portals for higher education. campusM helps institutions deliver on their strategic goals, giving students (and staff) a one-stop shop for everything they need online. Simple to administer, cost effective to implement and always innovative, campusM enables institutions to revolutionize their digital strategy.

CURRENT SITUATION

Overall observations

Like many aspects of life, higher education has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Campuses have been closed to all but nonessential staff, learning and teaching has moved online, and administrative staff have been working from home. There has been an increase in the number of meetings taking place virtually to substitute for face-to-face meetings that normally take place on campus.

Leaders are in discussions about how to handle the next academic year, with many expecting that classes will continue online this fall — whether they allow students back on campus or not.

Key findings

- Students and staff have generally been understanding of the complexity of the situation.

- The majority of communications are being managed by a central team with senior oversight.

- Institutions with a devolved approach to governance have experienced inefficiencies and confusion.

- Email (with links to relevant content) is the primary communication channel being used.

- Leaders feel they are able to meet short-term challenges, but the next 6-12 months will bring significant tests.

Teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching has shifted online, with a range of media and technologies being used — and the Learning Management System (LMS)/Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) has become the key hub for digital learning, coordinating the delivery of materials, resources and student assessment.

Library services are a key component in the provision of online learning, providing access to key online resources through search, discovery and reading list materials.

Key findings

- Synchronous delivery of classes is being facilitated by traditional online learning tools, like Adobe Connect and Blackboard Collaborate. Online video conferencing applications, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, GoTo Meeting and WebEx, are also becoming more widely utilized.

- Asynchronous delivery of classes largely falls to lecture capture solutions such as Panopto, Echo360 and Mediasite.

- Some institutions are also delivering virtual labs, with academics capturing the experiment or science students remotely accessing labs.

- Most institutions have temporarily moved away from centralized class management and scheduling to a more faculty-based approach.

- There has been significant uncertainty around assessment, with some institutions allowing open-book exams. This raises issues for academics, who must think about how they can rewriting exam questions to maintain academic rigor.

CHALLENGE 1: PLANNING FOR THE UNKNOWN

The biggest challenge institutions face going forward is the uncertainty regarding government requirements and the global spread of the virus.

From social distancing requirements and travel restrictions to the impact of reduced applications and non-returning students, not to mention the threat of a second wave of COVID-19 and rolling local lockdowns, institutions must plan for several different potential scenarios. These include (1) a hybrid teaching model (combining physical and virtual teaching), with the potential for some groups of students being on campus while others are still remote; (2) online-only teaching, an approach that a number of institutions have already said they plan to adopt for 2020-21; (3) semester one online, semester two on campus; and (4) business as usual.

Key findings

- Given the uncertainties, leaders are aware they must be able to adapt as the situation evolves.
- Institutions are taking a longer-term view, planning for 18 to 24 months of disruption before a more "normal" environment returns.
- There is an acceptance that the future will be different, offering both challenges and benefits.
- Institutions are looking to adopt technology that will help them support the new normal by enabling them to be agile and respond quickly to challenges as they arise.

How campusM can help

campusM can empower institutions by providing a digital one-stop shop for university services both on and off campus, on the device of a user's choice. With a simple-to-use app administration suite, it's quick and easy for institutions to provide a unified communication channel with the ability to react quickly and publish content updates in seconds.

campusM gives institutions the opportunity to build a sense of community even when students and staff can't be physically on campus and lets administrators deliver the right message to the right user, at the right time.

Recent feature launches such as campusM Quick Polls, Resource Booking and Online Class Attendance help users increase engagement and provide targeted, personal support.

CHALLENGE 2: DELIVERING EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

There are a lot of unanswered questions on the impact on teaching delivery when social distancing measures are likely to reduce room capacities by 80 to 90 percent. The conventional idea of what a lecture is will be impossible, and lecturers are going to have to make radical changes to their course delivery.

Learning spaces will likely have to adapt to new modes of delivery and new technologies being used, and collaborative group work is going to be much more challenging.

Key findings

- Some institutions are investing in a Digital Education Program to support the development of online teaching skills.

- Attrition rate for online classes is higher than for face-to-face learning.

- Measuring the engagement of students will be more challenging while students are off campus, although measuring interactions with digital services gives institutions new opportunities for engagement metrics.

- Teaching is likely to be a combination of conference calls and lecture recordings, and some institutions are looking at the possibility of running sessions on alternate weeks.

- There will be an even bigger move toward blended learning, which will need to be addressed in both physical spaces and teaching pedagogy.

How campusM can help

As online access to teaching and learning services becomes even more important than before, it is vital that students have a high-quality experience in accessing remote learning opportunities.

Providing seamless access to key university systems such as VLE/LMS, grades, assessments, schedules, library services and more via a single interface gives your students a great experience. And with in-built analytics, you can get an understanding of student engagement levels both on and off campus.

CHALLENGE 3: SUPPORTING THE STUDENT

New and returning students are going to need additional support as they move toward a new normal, and this includes managing their well-being and addressing the emotional impact the pandemic has had on them and their family. Providing clarity of message at the right time to the right student will be instrumental in ensuring a successful transition for the start of the year.

Key findings

- Significant effort is being put into developing plans for welcoming and transition activities, as these will be critical in ensuring that students feel safe and supported.

- Most institutions have a student support model that is reliant on face-to-face interactions. This model will need to change.

- Institutions are looking at ways to empower students through self-service rather than using physical support services.

- Figuring out how the social and collaborative experience that is a key aspect of the university environment can happen on a socially distanced campus is a big challenge.

- There are questions about how these challenges will impact student success and retention strategies, given how important a sense of community is to students.

How campusM can help

Providing students with the right support at the right time will be even more crucial in the coming months. It is important that students know the information they are seeing is correct and up to date, and a unified experience allows them to feel confident in the services they are using.

Universities should reach out to prospects and students on the device of their choice to help them feel like part of the campus community even when they're not able to attend physical Open Days or orientation events — and institutions should continue this engagement throughout the entire student journey with a personalized, contextualized experience.

campusM makes it easy to do this, while also understanding engagement whether students are on or off campus with tools like campusM Attendance, Quick Polls and in-depth analytics.

CHALLENGE 4: MAINTAINING A SOCIALLY DISTANCED CAMPUS

There is a clear expectation that a university's digital environment will be as important, if not more so, than the physical environment.

When campuses do reopen, they will need to adjust to accommodate social distancing guidelines. Institutions are looking at innovative ways to enable a "touchless campus," with the aim of limiting what students and staff have to physically touch (such as doors, books, and so on).

Key findings

- Many institutions are considering a phased return to campus for all stakeholders, including students, professional services, academic and support staff and researchers.

- The specific needs of user groups will have to be taken into account. For example, researchers who need to access on-campus facilities may be allowed on campus, but international students may still be studying online.

- Venue capacities will need to be reduced, and flow throughout facilities will need to be addressed. Controlled entrances and one-way systems are probably going to become commonplace.

- Booking systems to manage capacity and resources will be put into place.

- Institutions will face key challenges in how to differentiate themselves and justify the cost of their programs as less focus is placed on physical facilities and more on digital capabilities.

How campusM can help

As users return to campus, there will be a number of restrictions on space usage as a result of social distancing regulations. Institutions are looking at ways they can reduce contact with physical services while still maintaining a great student experience.

campusM provides students and staff with updated maps and route guidance through campus buildings — and the campusM Digital ID card allows students to access facilities with low or no touch.

In addition, the campusM Resource Booking product integration allows administrators to plan appropriate staffing and capacity and let students know the service they need will be available.

Personalized push notifications make it easy to keep students informed with any local quarantine requirements, and campusM Attendance lets students check in to class via their own app.

CHALLENGE 5: SUSTAINING THE BUSINESS

There are likely to be substantial long-term consequences as a result of the current crisis, and while it's unknown what these will be at the moment, it's safe to assume that student enrollment numbers are likely to decline over the next 12 to 24 months.

In this current environment, prospects might be more likely to pursue employment or apprenticeships instead of paying for a university education.

Key findings

- A decline in enrollment could significantly impact university budgets, and leaders are going to have to make difficult decisions.

- International students normally contribute a substantial proportion of institutions' income. Many institutions are now looking at other funding models that are more sustainable.

- Institutions that haven't previously needed to compete to attract students may need to recruit as demand outstrips supply.

- There is an understanding that institutions are realistically looking at a three- to five-year financial plan to recover from the pandemic.

How campusM can help

Adopting digital technologies can help institutions make the most of the resources they already have, as well as enhance their ability to attract students globally.

campusM gives universities financial certainty with an all-inclusive pricing model containing no hidden charges. What's more, our agile development cycle means that institutions benefit from ongoing product enhancements that adapt to the changing needs of higher education.

Because campusM is quick and easy to deploy, you can have services in student's hands in no time at all.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

At campusM, we are always looking at how we can develop the platform in response to customer feedback and sector insights. The following areas are currently in active investigation or development:

- The ability to help with facility capacity management, enabling students to book slots into learning spaces in order to maintain social distancing restrictions.

- The ability to create and administer daily check-in polling through the app. This would give institutions the ability to develop sentiment analysis, identifying students who need more emotional support.

- Tracking attendance in virtual classes and using this as a broader measure of student engagement.

- Using analytics to give institutions further insight into how engaged students are with digital services.

- Exploring how attendance data can be used to support contact tracing functionality, enabling the identification of students who checked into the same classes as infected individuals.

- Enhanced integration with key systems to deliver important business workflows, such as improved Teams integration to show upcoming events.

- Expansion of online registration to remove the need for physical interactions.

CONCLUSION

At a time when universities face unprecedented challenges, campus leaders must be flexible and innovative in creating high-quality experiences for students. The results of our conversations with campusM customers indicate that leaders are up to the task, and tools that enable universities to deliver online services in a highly personalized and engaging way — like campusM — can help as well.