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10 Keys to a Successful Fall 2020 Opening

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Author's note: As this is being written, conversations already are turning to the possibility campuses will not be able to open by fall, and may be looking at a January 2021 re-opening. While the financial losses will certainly be larger, and the lack of continuity for student learning and faculty scholarship certain to create new challenges if remote practices are required to be continued for another academic semester, the recommendations below apply equally to a September 2020 start or a January 2021 start.

As we continue to navigate what may be one of the most challenging and disruptive times in higher education – with hope, with optimism, and with a new-found spirit of unity – we begin to turn our collective attention to what's next. For university leaders and their teams, this means focusing on the fall 2020 semester. Summer provides a natural bridge between the shuttered spring semester and what we all hope will be a return to normalcy by fall. This means we must start thinking NOW about how we will ramp back up, what we will look like as an institution, and how we can best serve our students.

Fall is the new goal line. And the financial realities of failing to have a successful re-opening would be devastating to many colleges and universities, already facing serious challenges as a result of one-time expenditures to manage through the pandemic response. These include shifting to entirely online instruction (and student services and more), interruptions in revenue streams and rebates of pro-rated housing and dining fees, and maintaining employee payrolls.

The goal is not just to re-open in the fall, but to do so successfully. Decision-making starts now, even as we continue to manage the ongoing pandemic response in real-time. Students and their families will be looking for how we respond, how we adjust and adapt, and how we make student on-boarding and student success priorities. They will be looking for university leadership to exude both confidence and compassion, as well as an understanding that students will come back changed. Some will be coming back with new or exacerbated mental health challenges. Some will be coming back with new financial hardships at home. Some will not be coming back.

¹ *Across the Green* was started as a series of periodic letters from Provost Rosowsky to provide updates on current initiatives and information on topics of interest to the broader UVM academic community. Started in 2013, *Across the Green* was published three times per year during the six years Dr. Rosowsky served as UVM's Provost and Senior Vice President. The *ATG Brief* series continues in the spirit of this communication with topics focused on higher education and leadership.

We can (and will) turn this challenge into an opportunity for making some needed change, for demonstrating agility and adaptiveness, and for providing students a safe, nurturing, and inspiring place for learning and discovery. We can reaffirm our respect and support for faculty and staff. We can find new ways to engage with our alumni. We can create a new sense of identity, community, mission, purpose, and family. We can create excitement, we can energize and engage, and we can create shared ownership around shared goals for a shared future, perhaps like never before.

Here I offer my top-10 recommendations to university leaders and their teams. We are all learning, responding, and adapting in real-time. These recommendations are based on my experiences, my observations, and my insatiable belief in the power of our institutions. I offer them with humility and with tremendous hope.

1. Up your online marketing, branding, and communication game.

Create entirely new online tours. Recognize these will be the only campus tours most students are able to take. They should be far more detailed, more image-focused, and convey everything from what it's like to walk across the campus to what it's like to engage in a lab or studio. These are not your typical video campus tours. Now is the time to enhance these somewhat staid tours (that are nearly identical for all campuses). Many decisions will be made on the basis of these online tours. Treat them with the same level of commitment and investment as you had your campus tours. Be creative, understand the new role of these virtual tours, and create excitement. Help future students truly see themselves as members of your campus community.

Add "day-in-the-life" experiences to your online tours. Feature students, classes, field experiences, athletics, career fairs, undergraduates in research, the arts, and more. Feature campus institutions (events, icons, venues, traditions). Add mechanisms for students and parents to ask questions in real-time to admissions reps, to current students, or to a faculty member.

Develop online tours of housing options, of community access and events, and campus gathering spots (student center, library, athletics and wellness facilities). Create online visual identity to match/amplify your campus-based visual identity. You are selling your university via laptop and iPhone. Think differently and explore the creative options this affords. Those who are most bold, most creative, and most successful at conveying their campus identity will win this new race.

2. Create WOW experiences for onboarding, mindful of likely crowd-limits; these will NOT look those in like previous years.

New students and returning students are different audiences but both will be looking for onboarding activities that reflect where they are. They are craving certainty, confidence, and (for returning students) familiar contexts.

Even if strict social distancing guidelines are lifted, is likely that large-scale events will need to be replaced with smaller group events. Residence halls/floors, academic departments, learning

communities, athletic teams, and other affinity groups will play a larger role in orientation and other first-week events.

Use this opportunity to create entirely different types of events and activities. How will you create both cohort year affiliation and university spirit in smaller gatherings?

3. Increase your faculty and student-life engagement commitments in first two months after students return to campus; this is where online works.

We know that the first 6-8 weeks are critical to student retention. Recommit faculty advisors and student-life professional staff to meaningful outreach to students early in the semester. Use the lessons of online instruction this spring. Students are comfortable connecting virtually. But offer in-person meetings as well. More than ever before, students will be thirsting for belonging, for feeling secure and confident, and for feeling there are people looking out for them.

For this to work well, it must be a campus-wide commitment. Find the people willing to serve in these important roles and be sure they are given the time to do it right. Consider using teams consisting of a faculty member, a student life professional, and a current student when reaching out to students.

Use this time to think about wraparound student support services and what that could look like on your campus. From orientation to commencement, students should be receiving tailored services related to academics, advising, social development, health and wellness, and career planning. Recognize that students are returning with different needs, and with different levels of readiness and wellness. Show that you are responding to those needs.

Make an 8-week outreach plan to check-in with each student. Close the loop to make sure that all student problems are reported to the right office and students always receive a response. Check-in again before the semester ends.

4. Simplify and streamline options for students (academic, student life, housing, degree pathways); make it EASY to re-engage and feel successful.

This is the time to reduce clutter. Where universities have always taken pride in adding flexibility, pathways, and opportunities to individualize learning plans, now is the time to ratchet that back and present fewer options to students. This can help keep them from feeling overwhelmed, focus them on productive pathways toward degree completion, and reduce anxiety and stress.

Re-examine degree pathways and major requirements to see if there is latitude, flexibility, or freedoms that can be afforded. Show students the most efficient way to complete their degree, or to register for classes, or sign up for housing. Make clear statements that you are focusing on streamlining for student success, provide examples.

A student's sense of success starts with their ability to navigate sometimes complex systems. The more early successes student have when they return to campus, the more confidence they will

have. Reduce alternative pathways, reduce redundant steps, reduce back-door options, strive for uniformity in expectations of all students. This consistency will breed confidence and a sense of security. You can always add back options. But for 2020-21, the keys must be simplicity, efficiency, and lack of confusion.

5. Clearly message to faculty that you understand interruptions, pivots, and competing demands they experienced last semester; re-set expectations while showing compassion and gratitude.

Faculty have been asked to do something remarkable in the middle of the spring semester, moving to entirely online teaching from a remote (non-office) location, often with no prior experience in distance learning. And they did this, to the best of their abilities, without question and without demands. Never before has there been such a clear statement by faculty, all faculty, that we are here for our students and we will serve to the best of our abilities.

University leaders must recognize these efforts, this commitment, and this willingness to pivot quickly to online teaching, with which many faculty had no experience. They must also show that they recognize the challenges of teaching from home while also caring for children (also out of school) or other family members. Faculty and staff have had to attend simultaneously to work and family life. The notion of work-life balance has been lost for many and will take time to be recovered. Acknowledge this and support it.

As we return to campus, leaders should reaffirm expectations for faculty while simultaneously acknowledging their contributions and work over the past semester. We can never adequately thank them, but we can use this experience to write a new chapter in faculty-administrator relationships, one built on compassion, humanity, trust, and gratitude.

Reaffirm commitments to professional development and promotion. Examples could include sessions/guidance on (e.g.) how to restart a lab-based research program, how to manage a hybrid class that includes some on-campus and some off-campus students, how to cope with/manage new or exacerbated mental health issues in yourself or your students, etc. And there is little to be lost (and much to be gained) by allowing faculty to extend their tenure clock.

6. Discontinue non-essential contracts and operations; focus on preserving MISSION-CRITICAL academic, student support, research, and faculty support programs; unhook from unfunded service programs that are at the margins.

Financial implications of the pandemic are real and they are significant. This must be communicated to all parties. Our colleges and universities are committed first and foremost to educating students. For some, this also includes providing a robust research enterprise. For others it includes graduate and professional colleges, not just undergraduate instruction. Second, we are committed to responsible use of resources, to seeking efficiencies, and to principles of affordability and access. Nowhere in our mission does it say we will be all things to all people, we will sustain employees when it is no longer possible or necessary, or that we will deliver unfunded or underfunded programs or services to our states or communities. This is difficult for many to

hear, and there has been pushback against this position for years, but it's a new time for us all. The finances simply are not going to allow us to continue to serve beyond capacity, outside core mission, or to provide every academic area of study and support service for students, faculty, or staff.

We must make some difficult decisions and we must start immediately. The longer we wait, the deeper the financial challenge will become and the less likely some institutions will be able to emerge from the crisis viable and sustainable.

Undertake a university-wide exercise, in short order, to identify mission-critical programs. Agree to do all that you can to preserve and support those programs, even if it means downsizing or closing others. This will be very different from program prioritization exercises conducted over the last decade or so.

Help faculty, staff, students, and alumni to understand that with or without their participation in identifying mission-critical programs, they will be identified and decisions will be made to begin defunding others. Anticipate resistance, but leverage the reality of the crisis. This challenge is not unique to one campus, one college, one administration, or one university. This is impacting all of higher education and our response must be swift, even as we commit to leading with humanity and humility.

7. Engage more deeply (than ever before) with governance leaders.

Engage early and often with governance leaders as you transition back to operations and are forced to make hard decisions in face of the changed enrollments, financial obligations, and need to rebalance revenue and expense for the short and long-term. You likely will have tapped into all reserves and it will be critical to begin rebuilding those reserves immediately. The more the governance leadership understands the reality of what the institution and its leaders are facing, the more they will be able to be partners in the decision-making, advocates for responsible leadership, and effective messengers to their constituents.

Help governance groups and their leaders to understand that hard decisions are coming, and when. In the best-case scenario, leaders will be able to make these strategic and responsible decisions with support from the governance groups. In the worst-case scenario, the institution may declare financial exigency to clear a path forward for leaders to make necessary changes. But either way, changes are coming. Use this as an opportunity to elevate relationships with governance leaders. Now more than ever, we truly are all in the same boat.

8. Highlight what has been learned; commit to returning to core values/vision and campus-based mission but acknowledge opportunities discovered to ENHANCE how we serve our students.

Be open and forthcoming about what has been learned through this pivot experience, the good and the bad. Celebrate the spirit of cooperation and togetherness that enabled the campus to

come through the crisis. Recognize and appreciate the faculty, staff, and students for their flexibility and accommodation.

Highlight successful faculty and class experiences. Highlight new partnerships, new modalities, new flexibilities that have led to outstanding student learning and faculty teaching experiences.

Establish a committee of faculty and students to assess best-practices, what has been learned through the pandemic response, and what has the greatest potential to continue to be developed or used as part of the campus operations, whether related to pedagogy, advising, student services, campus communications, or other.

Re-affirm the university's core values, mission, and campus-based commitment to teaching, learning, and discovery. But embrace the new tools and practices that have been successful during the crisis.

9. Commit not just to ON-TIME degree completion for your returning students, but SHORTENING their time-to-graduation.

This should be part of plans to assist students whose financial circumstances have changed, e.g. through emergency aid, forgivable loans, and extended scholarship periods. Recognize the real economic losses students and their families have felt, commit to reducing their cost-of-degree-attainment and getting them into the workforce more quickly.

Make this part of your NEW mission. Use distance and online, summer, intersessions, experiential learning, etc. Create pathways for students to on-board (arrive) on campus with credits already completed. Communicate with parents about plans and commitments. They will want to know their students are safe when they return to campus and will be on-track to complete their degrees.

10. Think about how you will reconnect and communicate changes, good and bad, with your alumni. Use this opportunity to refresh your alumni communication strategy.

Everyone's lives have been impacted. Alumni, including your historically largest donors, will expect there to have to be changes. More than ever, their understanding and support will be needed to ensure continuity and build for a sustainable future. Philanthropy will play an outsized role in our institutions' futures.

We all will be looking for connections, for a sense of belonging, and for community. Universities and their alumni associations have a role to play and a huge opportunity to realize. Alumni will want to hear reassuring news about the University and its future. Donors, while they may be slow to return to historical levels of philanthropy, will still want to back a winner. They are predisposed to love the University. Give them reason for optimism, for hope, and for wanting to re-engage and offer support.



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