

Return to Campus: Perspectives from Higher Education Leaders

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The COVID-19 pandemic expedited changes in higher education that many predicted would happen over decades, forcing those seemingly distant evolutions to happen within weeks. Although initially challenging, COVID-19 has presented a unique opportunity for higher education leaders: an opportunity to assess what has worked in a remote environment and make decisions to proactively shape the future. Keeping in mind the institutional mission and the student experience, colleges and universities are focusing on the changing nature of the work being done, the workforce that will accomplish it, and the workplaces in which they are operating. After more than a year of near exclusive remote work—though many critical functions required certain staff to remain in-person throughout the pandemic—institutions are better able to examine the interests of their faculty, staff, and students, and refine the current talent model to incorporate lessons learned while continuing to work towards the mission of the institution.

In May and June 2021, Deloitte hosted two Return to Campus forums where leaders from institutions across the country shared their experiences around navigating the Future Of Work challenges presented by the pandemic. Looking at both quantitative and qualitative measures of employee sentiment, student experience, and campus needs, it is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to returning to campus. “There will be some degree of experimentation. We’re all learning as we go through this journey,” said **Dr. Kim Harrington, Chief Human Resources Officer at the Georgia Institute of Technology**. “It’s a cultural shift. Many individuals feel like ‘I have to see you, you have to be here in person,’ while others are just excited to get back on campus.”

“As we think about how our workspaces are being configured and how we are going to continue to offer support to our students, we also need to think about the employee and where they fit in on that continuum in terms of work-life balance,” said **Daren Hubbard, Vice President of Information Technology and Chief Information Officer, also at the Georgia Institute of Technology**. While the energy and draw of the on-campus experience is strong, the desire to control one’s own schedule is stronger. And many staff and administrators are pushing hard to maintain some measure of remote work in their future adaptive schedules.

Assuming institutions answer the call to move to a hybrid model, the discussion turns to what the new normal—if it can be called that—will look like. What are the most pressing issues, according to campus leaders? At **Indiana University, Deb Dunbar, Director of Talent and Organization Development**, highlighted that the pandemic, “has forced us to think about, ‘How are we going to be competitive? How are we going to recruit? How are we going to retain employees in a world that has changed?’” Pressing issues remain for most institutions, beyond the culture of the work environment. How will the move to hybrid affect the student experience? How can managers properly manage their hybrid workforce? And, what effect will it have on both real and perceived inequities among the varying levels of staff, faculty, and administration?

What We Heard
from more than 300 higher education leaders surveyed during Deloitte’s Spring 2021 virtual forums:

72%

prefer a hybrid work model.

“We’re really viewing this as an opportunity to **challenge the status quo** ... thinking strategically about what **our work, the workforce, and the workplace** is going to look like in the future.

- **Dr. Tim Bessolo**, Associate Vice President for Strategy and Business Operations, USC HR, Equity, and Compliance
University of Southern California

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78%

agree that the biggest challenge facing institutions during COVID was **maintaining work/life balance while remaining connected to their employees**.





Our Perspective: A Shift to Hybrid

Innovation is born out of necessity, and the abrupt shift to virtual environments across industries offered institutions the opportunity to reimagine the traditional face-to-face nature of classroom learning and personal growth on campus. This jolt exposed many of the opportunities that exist in the higher education model, particularly in how technology can be used to bolster the student and employee experience and allow collaboration across departments. It also showed many university employees that they can do their jobs from home, and many will not want to be forced back to completely in-person work arbitrarily.

The need for institutions to evolve is clear. The model of that evolution will vary by campus, but the overarching goal remains: a technology-enabled student experience that offers a blended, immersive, and digital residential experience that fuses the online and in-person worlds across campus.¹ This goal requires new approaches to both the student and employee experience.

Campus leaders must think critically about the services they are providing both to students and to employees. Which services need to be offered on campus to be most effective, and which can be equally—if not more—effective virtually? It is helpful to divide the critical components of the higher education talent model into three categories: work, workforce, and workplace.



Work: How it Has Changed

When leaders think about the future of work, they must first consider a variety of questions pertaining to the character of the work. Which activities and interactions should occur in the office or require in-person interaction, and which should be accomplished remotely or on micro- or satellite campuses? Which positions are not suitable for hybrid or remote work? What technologies will be required for the workforce to remain collaborative, engaged, and fulfilled? Institutions are turning to data and analytics to anticipate the specific needs of students and staff, rolling out automation tools to assist with manual workflows, and engineering a robust infrastructure to support hybrid and virtual interactions far more effectively than ever before.

The greatest challenge to redesigning work on campus resides in resistance to change. For **Dr. Christopher Lee, Chief Human Resources Officer at William & Mary**, the focus is on the people. “The technology is easy. We can all make technology changes. It’s the people that present challenges – getting people to adopt new technologies and learn new policies. That’s where the difficulty lies.” Despite this obstacle, finding ways to remove long-standing silos within departments and colleges is critical to a more holistic and unified campus. The element of ‘work’ in our future of work environment can be facilitated and informed by using the collective knowledge being gathered across campus, which will effectively break down those silos. This collaboration across units can improve productivity and expand the capabilities of what work—and how much work—can be accomplished, and how much more efficiently it can be done.



We’re asking our managers to **look at this return-to-work process from a place of empathy...** and find a way to balance work and personal lives as best we can.

- **Brett Leibsker**, *Interim Associate Vice President, Human Resources; Executive Director, Employee and Labor Relations*

The University of Chicago



60%

of participants reported that they are **still fully remote** as of June 2021.

72%

responded that **a hybrid work model is ideal for them**, allowing for a mix of on-campus and remote time.



Challenging our traditional business model will be essential as we seek to **enhance the educational value to our students** and the overall experience of all stakeholders.

- **Dr. Darren Brooks**, *Executive Director, Center for Human Resource Management*

Florida State University



Perception of Student Engagement by Higher Education Leaders



■ % of respondents who feel that students in a remote environment are engaged...



Workforce: Who Is Doing the Work

The immediate shift to a fully remote workforce challenged the orthodoxy of higher education, and institutions had to make quick evaluations of what services must be delivered in person, and what could be offered virtually.

The benefits of remote work to the workforce itself are boundless. This past year has shown a marked improvement in employee wellbeing and productivity for many because of increased work flexibility. Gone are the multiple hour commutes and the stress of running back and forth across campus trying to make various in-person meetings. In June 2020, 7 in 10 U.S. employees surveyed felt that virtual work will accelerate gender equity in the workplace.² This is also an opportunity for universities to differentiate themselves as preferred employers, thus recruiting and retaining better talent as a result.³

But remote work is not without its risks. Despite an overwhelming preference from staff to remain remote in some capacity, students do not share in those feelings. Numerous studies have shown that student engagement is down significantly, and a greater burden is being placed on institutions to deliver the expected value of an education without bringing people to a fully in-person campus experience.



Workplace: Where is Work Being Done

The workplace itself, which includes the environment, technology, and culture where work is done, must be adapted to extend beyond the main campus. A full suite of virtual and blended services across the university mandates an upgrade to connectivity infrastructure to deliver a seamless on-campus and remote experience. University leaders should be organizing networks of cross-functional teams with the mission of supporting students. Leaders should plan the workplace around the needs and preferences of students, faculty, researchers, and staff.

Universities should consider their campus footprint and what spaces can be altered to accommodate hot desking and space sharing opportunities, sometimes referred to as a 'borderless office' approach. The move to shared workspaces will not only allow for more productive collaboration, but also have the benefit of reducing real estate costs. While faculty and researchers will still require traditional offices in most cases, the days of individual offices and cubicles for most staff are a thing of the past. The future of the workplace in higher education is the intentional use of shared space centered around the teaching, learning, and research experience.

End Notes

¹ Selingo, J.; Clark, C.; Noone, D.; Wittmayer, A. (2021, January 27). The Hybrid Campus.

<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/post-pandemic-hybrid-learning.html>

² Jones, K. (2020, August 10). 10 stats you need to know about culture, COVID and work. CultureIQ. <https://cultureiq.com/blog/10-stats-you-need-to-know-about-culture-covid-and-work/>

³ Park, S. (2021, April 22). Remote Working Statistics 2021: 15 Exciting Trends. Remote Bliss. <https://remotebliss.com/remote-working-statistics-and-trends/>

Of the 300+ higher education leaders surveyed during the two forums:

70%

feel that staff productivity has increased while in a remote environment, but...

53%

fear that student engagement is down over the same period.



The majority of those surveyed felt the tool or technology that would benefit them most is a **second monitor, or at least a larger one.**

Many also mentioned the need for:



updated **social technology**



improved **WiFi and connectivity**



better **IT infrastructure**



Wrap-Up: The Future of Work

The future of work on college campuses has been accelerated by the global pandemic, and university leaders are working hard to create solutions that meet the needs and demands of their respective workforces and campus populations. Balancing the institution's mission with the needs and wants of its employees, while ensuring that the teaching, research, and student experience continues to improve, is a fluid endeavor with unlimited possibilities. By focusing on the unique attributes of their own work, workforce, and workplace, institutions can lead the charge toward the future of work. The cultural and operational shifts experienced under emergency conditions have illustrated that many changes previously considered "off limits" in higher education are, in fact, quite implementable and beneficial in the long term. The time to design a 'Return to Better' strategy in higher education is now. Getting started could begin with any number of the following actions:

- Conduct a sentiment analysis through surveys and focus groups to assess the current maturity level of the institution's workplace flexibility practices
- Analyze opportunities for financial benefits and to optimize flexibility (e.g., reducing the amount of on-campus space needed for offices and parking; reduced commute for employees can lead to increased productivity)
- Develop flexible and sustainable work models and processes to decide which employees can be successful in which work model
- Develop resources, such as toolkits and trainings, for managers and employees to understand potential work models, support team decisions and discussions, and become more successful in a flexible work environment
- Update existing policies to incorporate flexible work guidelines that improve the employee experience while supporting the institution's mission
- Develop a robust technology infrastructure to support hybrid and virtual interactions
- Analyze recruitment and retention data to inform baseline analyses and understand the motives of applicants for applying to and joining a new organization

Let's talk.

Have an interest in the Future of Work in Higher Education? We do, too.

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