

THE END OF SMALL CAMPUSES?

From physical to virtual location

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Unity College in Maine, which frames itself as "America's Environmental College," has opened up debate about whether small institutions really need to have flagship campuses to survive.

In a recently updated FAQ, college leaders wrote that for the time being, the school planned to "continue to offer face-to-face, experiential, environmentally-focused programs" on its 240-acre campus — once the campus reopens. At the same time, they noted, "If it is no longer financially viable, the college leadership has the ability to explore selling the main campus or any other college assets ... in order to ensure resources are allocated to best serve our students, their needs and the long-term sustainability of the college."

Unity, a private nonprofit liberal arts college, is on the small side with just under 1,300 students. However, enrolment rose after the school announced the "Path Forward," which shifted the college away from its traditional two-semester model, to a new calendar featuring eight five-week terms, enabling prospective students to apply to at any point throughout the year, with distance and hybrid classes.

Last September, for example, the institution announced its "largest incoming undergraduate class ever" — 296 new students — a 130 percent increase in distance education students. The change in format was made in response to a 33 percent decline in enrolment for the traditional format and a projected loss of \$12 million to \$14 million in the 2020-2021 academic year.

As the board of trustees explained in a letter to the campus community, "Once, the campus on Quaker Hill Road was our classroom, then Maine became our classroom. Now, our classroom is any location where a Unity College student is learning. As with schools across the country, we are considering the opportunities that presents."

Currently, all courses are being delivered online. The use of the hybrid learning approach is being considered for fall 2021, depending on pandemic conditions.

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The next generation of academics and researchers could be lost to better-paying occupations as deteriorating employment conditions render university careers less appealing. Students may gravitate to explicitly vocational degrees leaving arts, commerce and some science degrees to wither on the vine. New trends could give rise to a wave of freelance academic "superstars" as institutional affiliations erode and "learning designers" supplant many traditional academics, says a report by the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

Lead author Gwilym Croucher admitted that attempts at prediction were "fraught" amid the evolving policy response to the pandemic. "Obviously, nobody knows what's going to happen," he conceded. "Having said that, Covid seems to be exacerbating some trends and it's all happening at once. In that sense we can probably say something meaningful about what the future might hold."

He highlighted workforce issues as a particular challenge. Casual and sessional staff were likely to be jettisoned just as baby boomer academics retired and international recruitment was hampered by lingering travel bans. Because they are big, complex organisations and have highly skilled staff, universities are quite hard to scale up and scale down quickly. If people go somewhere else, it's not like you can just replace them overnight. People are not necessarily waiting in the wings.

Dr Croucher said much hinged on whether international student flows recovered, and students' apparent acceptance of remote learning proved enduring. He noted that predictions of "online education being the future" had first emerged in the 1990s. "Thirty years later, on-campus is still considered by many people to be the gold standard."

State governments may soon be asked to contribute in a manner they have not for a generation, the paper suggests. "The financial strain and continuing absence of most international students may force radical restructure of university workforces and missions and the possible emergence of a two-tier or at least two-track system.

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