

eCampus News

## **Voices** from the **Field**

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# Planning the Post-Pandemic Campus Environment

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The last year and a half have been difficult for college and university leaders, faculty, staff, and students alike. But there have been some promising takeaways as well.

Institutions were forced to experiment with innovative modes of instruction and operation. From this process emerged new technologies and pedagogies that created more flexibility for learners and employees, as well as new devices and protocols for keeping campuses safe.

In an interview, three edtech leaders revealed how life has changed for their institutions, what changes they expect will continue moving forward, and how technology has played a key role in the transformation.



**Raymond Lefebvre** is the Chief Information Officer and Vice Chancellor of Information Technology Services for the University of Massachusetts Boston.



**Alex Wirth-Cauchon** is the Chief Information Officer and Executive Director of Library, Information, and Technology Services for Mount Holyoke College, a women's college in South Hadley, Massachusetts.



**Brian Atkinson** is the Director of Information Technology for Idaho College of Osteopathic Medicine (ICOM), a private, for-profit osteopathic medical school founded in 2016.



**Q1:** How has instruction changed at your institution during the pandemic, and will these changes continue when the threat from COVID-19 is over? What technology solutions are needed to support this new model effectively?

**RL:** The last 18 months at UMass Boston has been primarily remote instruction. For the spring 2021 semester, we did start to have some in-person classes, but it was a very small number. The key for us was, we piloted something called BeaconFlex, which is our take on hyflex teaching and learning (where the instructor is teaching to students in person and remotely at the same time).

We piloted about half a dozen classes in this hyflex delivery model. It's been successful, and now we're planning to provide more BeaconFlex classes for the fall 2021 semester.

All of our students are returning to campus in the fall. We expect a full complement of students, and on-campus teaching and learning will resume. But some classes will remain remote, and there will be some BeaconFlex classes mixed in as well.

For these classes, we're using audio-visual equipment in different configurations for large and small classrooms, and portable BeaconFlex carts for added flexibility. The setup provides a webcam, a microphone, and a laptop for the instructor, and the classrooms also have a fully functioning front end, which allows the professor to share his or her screen with the students who are in class as well as those who are remote. Students who are learning remotely are able to see and hear their peers as if they were in the classroom, which is very important. IT has partnered with Academic Affairs to design BeaconFlex course delivery to be the best it can be.

We're very excited about maintaining this flexibility going forward. The question is scalability. How many of these cases will we be able to support initially, and how many will become BeaconFlex classes over time? We definitely have high hopes that the combination of pedagogy and technology will lead to a new and lasting educational paradigm.

There's really no going back to the way we were pre-pandemic. Students, faculty, and staff have all benefited in some respects from this more flexible approach to education. But we can't take a one-size-fits-all approach. It's going to require a mix of different modalities and technologies.



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**AWC:** For the undergraduate college curriculum, we are returning to our core as a residential liberal arts college with the bulk of our instruction happening in person, on campus. However, faculty will be bringing approaches from the past year into their repertoire.

For instance, many will continue to use flipped instruction in which lectures and other less active components are delivered asynchronously online, allowing them to focus synchronous class time on discussion, projects, and other active learning. In particular, the Psychology and Education department is rethinking its introductory course to reuse many of the recordings made last year, allowing instructors to teach much smaller discussion sections in person. Additionally, we have a number of international students who might not be able to make it back to campus. We are still working on what classes we can provide remotely for that population.

Last year we adopted Kaltura, a video cloud platform, to manage the expected increase in faculty use of video in a way that's accessible from the full range of countries where our students live. We plan to continue its use, which has expanded to serve other areas of the college to share recordings of speakers and events put on, for instance, by our Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, as well as Student Life.

Many of our graduate programs were hybrid already, having pioneered blending active learning methods that include students around the world and in classrooms in South Hadley via live discussion and small group work. Tiffany Espinosa, Executive Director of Professional and Graduate Education, writes the following:

“Of our three graduate programs, two have always been hybrid low-residency models, and so they were well equipped for the past year. We received feedback from students in our campus-based program that hybrid learning was particularly supportive of busy working professionals and parents. This is definitely something we want to continue; adapting to the pandemic has helped us to find new ways to meet the needs of our community. The technologies that most effectively enable this are cameras that allow remote learners to have the experience of in-person participation, combined with web-connected devices that allow students to share work live with each other regardless of whether they are working onsite or remotely. And, of course, good internet and WiFi for everyone!”

**BA:** Over the past 15 months, ICOM's instruction has had to become a hybrid of small group, socially-distanced in-person learning and a multimedia approach to distance learning. As a medical school, and particularly an osteopathic medical school, much of the teaching and learning is done in our hands-on labs. We accomplished this by keeping students in very small groups and spreading them out across the building. Instructors are able to stay connected with students throughout the building by utilizing video conferencing and large-screen displays. This allowed instructors to teach to students no matter what learning space they were in and allowed students to easily interact with faculty.



The large-screen displays played a huge role in allowing students and faculty to keep distant within the same building. All of our learning spaces have Sharp large-screen displays. We also have 24 group study rooms that have 70-inch Sharp displays. These rooms allow students to airplay prerecorded lectures for small group study. They also make it convenient for students to engage in Webex classes while on campus.

Distance learning has had to take on many different forms. Some lectures were synchronous through web conferencing (Webex), while others were prerecorded and viewed through our lecture capture system (Panopto). To confirm that students were getting the instruction they needed, instructors would record themselves practicing techniques with their iPad and submit the videos for faculty review.

While many of our students and faculty long for the return of in-person teaching and learning, we recognize that a hybrid approach is likely to be a better fit, giving students and lecturers the option to learn and work remotely if that is what works best for them. We recognize that a blended learning environment gives students the option to tailor their own learning path and achieve greater results for each individual. We are currently incorporating a lecture capture studio to give faculty the option to record high-quality lectures that can keep students engaged while distanced. We also remain heavily invested in web conferencing for both video learning and communication.





**Q2:** Will remote working continue to be an option for some employees at your institution? If so, can you explain why and what that might look like? What technologies are needed to support this workforce model effectively?

**RL:** In the beginning, about 98 percent of employees were off campus. We probably plateaued about six months ago with 20 percent of our workforce on campus at any given time. Our campus wasn't available to faculty and staff unless you had prior approval to be on campus.

Now, we're actively putting together our Return to Campus plans for the fall semester with an eye toward flexible work arrangements wherever possible. With students returning to campus in the fall, that means we expect to bring back all essential in-person services and related personnel to meet the needs of students in time for the start of the semester.

In IT, we're bringing people back in a controlled, staggered fashion so that we can "wake up" the technology that's been asleep for almost a year and a half now, such as classroom projectors and the technology in meeting spaces. There's no guarantee that it will work when we turn it all back on.

Mixed-modality work arrangements have been the norm since the pandemic began. A solid VPN has and will continue to be central to securely gaining access to our IT services, while our "Cloud PC" Windows virtual desktop service, which we stood up in response to the pandemic, will provide flexible access to computing resources from on or off campus.

While there's going to be a big return of students, faculty and staff in the fall, we're trying to work out arrangements so that personnel who can work remotely and/or want hybrid, flexible work schedules are able to do so. Like everyone else, we've learned there are certain jobs that can be done successfully remotely—and flexible work arrangements can be effective as long as you set them up and manage them properly.

**AWC:** We have learned a lot about working remotely this year, and we have found that in many instances it can serve both the employee and the college well. The Mount Holyoke staff have been incredibly productive this past year working mostly remotely. The college is currently defining principles to guide decisions about supporting greater flexibility both in time and in location, while recognizing that, as a residential liberal arts college, the in-person connection is still vital to the transformative education we provide.



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We expect that a growing number of positions will be issued laptops instead of desktop computers to support this flexibility. We are also stepping up our reliance on our VPN and centralized management of remote devices through tools such as Jamf.

We will be reviewing our computer allocation and replacement strategy more fully to address the budget challenges that could result from these shifts.

**BA:** We anticipate that a number of our faculty and staff can be effective working from home and want to have the choice. During the pandemic, our IT department worked hard to transition most of our employees to laptops in order to have a mobile workforce, allowing them to work securely from anywhere. Since office space is also an ongoing issue, we are currently exploring options for office hoteling, allowing employees to schedule an office that would be equipped with a large-screen display and AppleTV for collaboration and a desktop display with speakers and webcam for virtual meetings.



**Q3:** What changes have you made in the last 15 months to protect the health of students and employees? Of these, what changes will become permanent or ongoing practices moving forward? What technologies are you using to help with this?

**RL:** IT's role has primarily been in providing an enterprise service management platform for ensuring health and safety. We've created a tool within our ServiceNow platform for this, called SafeCampus. It's a series of modules that includes daily health check-in capabilities to be able to track coronavirus symptoms. There's also positive test result tracking, so we can track and share that information with the appropriate people. We also added an ad-hoc campus request capability for requesting and granting approvals. By requiring approval through this system, we know who's on campus every day and where they're going to be for contact tracking purposes. We're also looking at using the system to track vaccination statuses, but we're not sure we're going to do that yet.

My prediction is, this platform will live on for all of 2022. Hopefully, we'll be able to wind down our use of the SafeCampus solution by the end of that year.

**AWC:** We leaned heavily on our existing toolset, including Point and Click (our SaaS Electronic Health Record system) and CampusGroups (our SaaS Student Engagement System) to manage activities like our testing program and tracking student immunization records. We will be partnering with our insurer around staff vaccinations.

**BA:** The biggest change we made over the last 15 months to protect the health and safety of students and employees was with the use of mandatory temperature and mask sensors at the main entrances. We no longer require people to use them when entering the building, but they will remain available to people to use at their own convenience. IT didn't play much of a role in this process; it was left up to our facilities and security departments to provide temperature scanners and do contact tracing.

**Q4: Do you have any other general thoughts about what the future holds for colleges and universities, or lessons learned from your experience?**

**RL:** The COVID-19 pandemic struck unexpectedly, leading to implementation of full-scale business continuity plans overnight. In hindsight, UMass Boston was prepared for the pandemic, and the transition to remote teaching, learning, and working has been manageable and overall successful.

We've learned a lot along the way and have applied these key lessons to improve our IT capabilities. Our deployment of technical chat services, as well as a self-service portal and knowledge base, are examples of technology improvements that will live on post-pandemic. Our investment in Cloud PC and student laptops for students will also live on, as will the many cyber security improvements we've made.

Perhaps most importantly, flexibility in delivering IT services to students, faculty, and staff will live on, as we have proven that we can provide high-quality IT services on or off campus—and the new normal will reflect this fact for years to come.

My hope is that all CIOs have improved their operations during the pandemic. It's provided an opportunity for all IT leaders to step back, review their organization, and make it stronger and better, especially from a business continuity perspective.

**AWC:** At Mount Holyoke, we have been affirmed in the value of the holistic, rich, interactive, hands-on, and intensely personalized education that we provide. At the same time, we have learned that we can enhance that, can become more nimble, and allow greater flexibility in time and place for working and learning by tapping technology more fully.

**BA:** Overall, I think ICOM was well positioned to handle mobile workforce and student body. Being a relatively new school, we were built on a 100-percent cloud infrastructure that allows for the flexibility needed during the pandemic. Moving forward, ICOM will likely lean on the types of technology that allow greater mobility. I expect that flexibility will become a much higher priority in the technology decision-making of the future.



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Today's tech-savvy students and professors expect to be able to communicate in collaborative environments. To encourage student engagement, lecture halls and libraries need technology that can keep up. Not to mention, the past year has presented new challenges for staff and students, such as hybrid teaching. Higher educational institutions must preserve the learning experiences they're so well known for while finding solutions for distance learning and safety measures for in-person learning. Sharp can help improve efficiencies, encourage learning from anywhere and optimize workflow and document processes with award winning printers and copiers, durable laptops, collaboration and digital displays, managed print services and managed IT services. To learn more about Sharp's education solutions, visit <https://business.sharpusa.com/vertical-markets/education>

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