

J. Michael Locke

Musings

#86: College and Covid July 25, 2020

A lot of people have asked for my thoughts on the pending Fall and college “reopening.” The dislocation and uncertainty is creating significant strain on families across the country.

Most colleges are welcoming students back with various hybrid models (here is a list maintained by the Chronicle of Higher Education [college plans](#)). Our two college age children recently received their schedules and while they will be on campus, their classes are 75% and 100% online (I am calling this hybrid). The cynics say this is because the universities need the dorm money but I don’t attribute any ill motives. Everyone wants to get back to normal – administrators, students, teachers – and this is the best university leaders think they can do and protect the health of everyone.

I encourage university leaders to take this hybrid model and really innovate. It should be the model of the future as I wrote about some months ago drawing an analogy to Peloton (see attached). Just like bricks & clicks in retail where you buy online and pick up at the store or the combination of your mobile banking app and some branches, the preferred path is to leverage technology. Classrooms should be flipped with content transfer from expert to student happening with a website or streaming lecture and then the classroom should be a vibrant, interactive laboratory like exchange.

Smaller private schools should be looking at the Oxford model. TedX has been rolling a form of this out [ted-circles](#) . You have the Ted talk and then a small group gathers to interact on the topic.

An unfortunate outcome of the emergency shift to online this spring was a lot of bad online education. Many folks see online as inferior because of what they experienced. It doesn’t have to be. As someone who has been working in online education since 1999, it can be a rich, vibrant learning experience. However, that takes a well-designed course and trained instructor with supporting technologies. A professor emailing a PDF and using zoom is not an online course.

Having experienced poor online this Spring and now getting online schedules, many parents are looking at the cost and saying “is it worth it?” A large part of the value of a traditional, post-secondary education is the residential experience. The high price of private schools is not worth it unless administrators figure out how to keep the vibrancy of the campus. This is not easy. My guess is there will be no Fall sports of any material kind. Most schools are mandating masks outside of personal living space. This is where administrators need to focus. I would encourage them to be realistic about the behavior of 18-21 year olds. Gatherings are going to happen. I like Purdue’s “test everybody” approach and the colleges which have shifted schedules to basically end by thanksgiving and limit coming/going. Based on my experience, Covid impact on healthy kids this age is pretty minimal.

I do think we will see deflationary pressure building on schools. The national discussion on student debt combined with concerns regarding online will drive parents/adult students to look for lower prices. See

[some-colleges-discount-tuition-prices-online-fall](#). This has been happening pre-Covid but in an opaque way. The average discount rate for Freshman this past fall at private colleges was 52%, up from 42% a decade ago. So while private schools publish tuition rates of \$50k or more, the average person is paying ½ of that by receiving institutional aid which is really just a price discount. Many small schools are going to struggle to survive these changes. Here is an interesting article by a Stern professor (thanks Bob King Jr). <https://www.profgalloway.com/uss-university>.

You are starting to see some colleges address the cost side of their operation. See Illinois Wesleyan recent move [illinois-wesleyan-university-liberal-arts-program-cuts](#). How about this statistic at that school. *About 630 students were majoring in financial and nursing subjects in 2019 — programs that have only 18 tenure-track positions — compared with 83 majoring in traditional humanities fields that have 23 faculty members on hand.*

Be safe.

Jml

Second Thoughts

Is “Karen” a racist term? According to Urban Dictionary it is “the stereotypical name associated with rude, obnoxious and insufferable middle aged white women.” I think it is inappropriate for the Mayor of Chicago to call the White House spokeswoman a “Karen.”

We should all be wearing masks when we can’t socially distance but I view there to be a difference between saying we should all be doing something and saying the federal government should mandate it. I guess I am a libertarian. I don’t look to the federal government to solve issues which is an assumption underlying much of the media coverage.

Maybe I should have been a Packer fan as I believe in Lombardi Time. From google: “Basically, it worked like this: Lombardi expected his players and coaches to be 15 minutes early to meetings and practices. Not on time -- 15 minutes early. If they weren't, he considered them "late." Thus, it came to be called Lombardi time.” The clock outside Lambeau Field is actually set to 15 minutes ahead.