A tale of 2 campuses

Hampshire College eyes fall reopening as Holyoke Community opts to stay online

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Separate announcements by two Western Massachusetts colleges this week underscored a fact worth remembering as schools look toward the fall term: One size doesn't fit all.

The president of Hampshire College says his institution is preparing to welcome students back to campus, less than six months after the coronavirus pandemic emptied dorms and forced education into remote learning at the college in Amherst and throughout the nation.

Ed Wingenbach described that scenario as "likely," but emphasized it remains up to the state government to allow it.

Just 17 miles to the south, Holyoke Community College officials felt the reasons to make a decision outweighed those to delay. Basing it largely on the demographics of their students, HCC administrators declared the fall semester — with very few exception — would be handled online or remotely, just as the spring semester has been conducted.

Differing strategies, announced on the same day, deliver an important message about college reopenings: a return to traditional classroom learning and campus activity will not be done uniformly.

Rather, throughout Western Massachusetts, New England and America, unique circumstances at each school, along with varying state restrictions on social gatherings, will create a jigsaw puzzle of solutions. Assume one institution's decision will provide clues for the next is a mistake.

"As long as the State of Massachusetts allows colleges to open, which seems likely, Hampshire fully intends to welcome students to campus in the fall," Wingenbach said in a letter to the college community. "Our class sizes are small, allowing students and professors to spread out in classrooms."

Hampshire is projecting 550 to 600
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students on its 800-acre campus, making social distancing viable. The irony of Hampshire's situation—not referred to Wingenbach, but unmistakable—is that a college whose financial crisis was coupled with low enrollment seems unusually positioned to reopen in the fall, precisely because a relatively small number of students attend it.

Wingenbach said Hampshire has been rallying from its financial straits and will continue to do so, despite the indisputable economic impact of COVID-19. At Holyoke Community College, a close look at the two-year college’s demographics caused school officials to commit to online education in the fall—four months before the 2020-21 academic year begins.

Holyoke Community College has a significant population of students who are older, serve as essential workers or have children. As a rule, that makes them more susceptible to COVID-19 contact than teens or young adults in college.

The biggest difference, though, is that Holyoke Community is a commuter school and Hampshire College is not. It might be tempting to look at this as an obvious apples-versus-oranges comparison, but the issues raised by their distinct populations will be faced by countless other institutions as well.

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Rachel Rubinstein, HCC vice president for academic and student affairs

Any institution, in fact, whose student body consists of both commuter and residential students (and often, international students) will face the same questions and decisions within their own campuses.

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HCC officials decided to give students, faculty, and staff time to prepare for continued remote learning. The shuttered spring semester has forced faculty and students to rethink the broader higher education package, and how it can be best utilized.

Rubinstein said HCC administrators remain optimistic that in-person activities will gradually resume at a community college that serves 11,500 students each year. Their willingness to accept the second wave of COVID-19 could foreshadow an agnostic late-summer decision at countless institutions: whether to reopen campuses as faculty, students and staff all crave, or keep them closed for fear of reigniting the pandemic, despite alluring numbers suggesting it has passed.

"Hampshire has some significant advantages for ensuring health and safety of our students on campus, and has already taken steps this spring to institute protocols."

Ed Wingenbach, president of Hampshire College

Is Wingenbach's cautious optimism misplaced? Did HCC act prematurely? Or is it possible, even likely, that each is making the proper calculated analysis required at this moment. Campuses around the region and across the nation will face similar choices with only state regulations and informed analysis—and not the examples of neighboring institutions—as a guide.

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Wingenbach said in his qualified yet optimistic outlook. As colleges and universities await the day campuses are alive again, it appears certain that day will come more fully or at least sooner for some, but months later or in a piecemeal way for others.