

## #AloneTogether

Sonny Ramaswamy  
NWCCU President

SARS-CoV2, COVID-19, Coronavirus, Wuhan, Flatten-The-Curve, Pandemic, Lockdown, Shelter-In-Place, Social Distancing, PPE, Zoombombing, Ventilators, Hydrochloroquine, Fauci, Flexibilities, ....

These are terms and phrases we had barely heard of, nor part of our daily vocabulary, until just a few months ago.

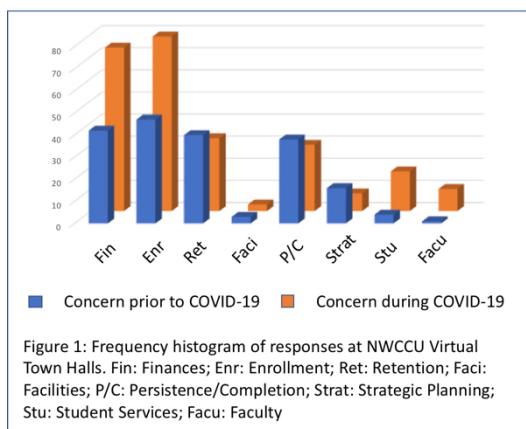
Like a lightning bolt, out of nowhere, COVID-19 struck, with its concomitant individual and societal impacts. Just like that, we felt stranded. Insecure. Afraid. Angst-ridden. Divided. The sense of security and comfort we had taken for granted, no longer guaranteed.

Yet, there has been a sense of togetherness and camaraderie during this crisis, enabled, in part, by technology and, in part, the sharing of Internet memes. Some downright funny. Some poignant. Some corny.

The hashtag *Alone Together (#AloneTogether)* campaign developed by various entertainment companies and the Ad Council to educate audiences on the importance of social distancing while creating unity, speaks to the times we are in, particularly in higher education.

Like other institutions of higher education, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities' (NWCCU) family of institutions had to switch midstream from on-campus to online classes. Some institutions allowed students to continue to stay in residence halls, while others provided laptops to students or allowed students to access Wi-Fi from parking lots.

In partnership with other institutional accreditors, NWCCU sought and/or provided information on federal and congressional approval of "flexibilities" for online education, length of term, funding and student aid, taxability and veterans issues, to name a few.



With federal approval, and despite significant trepidation on the part of some of our institutions up for review of their accreditation, our cadre of evaluators successfully undertook virtual evaluation visits with the Zoom platform. Indeed, preliminary analysis suggests the virtual evaluation visits were every bit as effective as onsite evaluation visits.

We hosted virtual town hall conversations with NWCCU institutional leadership, where we learned of extant and future challenges and concerns, including finances and cash flow, impending credit crunch, declining enrollments, summer melt, recruitment issues, impacts on retention

and graduation, issues of mental health, PTSD, and emotional well-being, challenges to being able to offer experiential learning, equity issues, digital divides, advocacy, and even the long-term viability and sustainability of some institutions.

We heard of the potential need for mergers and even the possibility of closure; colleges left standing may find themselves in a very different landscape.

And, most gratifyingly, we heard of individuals and institutions partnering and sharing in business office and educational resources and approaches to offer online and experiential learning opportunities.

These are reflective of what we are hearing and reading about in the media from across North America and, for that matter, the rest of the world. Although we are socially isolated as a result of COVID-19, these shared experiences and support for each other epitomize *#AloneTogether*.

The two key, universal and significant concerns expressed during the virtual town halls included Finances and Enrollments; all the other issues seemingly manageable.

Indeed, prior to the COVID-19 crisis, we had already been reading of significant enrollment declines and budget challenges; the current crisis only crystallized the existential threat higher education faces.

Almost overnight, faculty and institutions were forced to switch to online delivery; their capacity and capability for online education ranged the gamut: from almost zero experience and capacity to veteran creators of online courses and degree programs with the best capacity and infrastructure money can buy.

Similarly, the capacity and capability of students to learn in an online modality ranged from almost zero experience and capacity to seasoned with the best capacity and infrastructure.

The disparities in capacity and capability—equipment, knowledge, broadband connectivity—reflects the urban/rural divide, and most pronounced and challenging for institutions serving students from underserved communities and backgrounds.

Regardless of the differences in capacity and capabilities, surveys indicate college students are generally dissatisfied with their remote learning experiences during the spring 2020 term. In part, this dissatisfaction is because of social isolation and lack of community in the digital world, which apparently most institutions were unaware of and/or unable to provide for. Some students have even filed class-action lawsuits demanding their money back.

The (in)ability to ensure quality educational experiences, particularly for programs requiring experiential learning, is of great concern, as plans are made for the potential continuance of online education in the summer and fall.

Concurrently, as talk of reopening colleges and universities for on-campus instruction, we hear of concerns regarding the health and mental well-being of students, faculty, and staff. For example, during the virtual town halls, most, if not all, expressed concerns regarding the potential cost (and sources of funding needed) and capacity for infrastructural changes needed to ensure social distancing and the health of the campus community, personal protective equipment (PPE), testing, and tracing.

In many ways, closing campuses was easy; however, reopening at this time with the potential for a second wave of the continuing COVID-19 crisis is fraught with uncertainty, not the least because of the uncertainty surrounding the viral epidemiology.

In the inimitable words of the Nobel Laureate, Paul Romer, “*a crisis is a terrible thing to waste*,” and these uncertain COVID-19 times offer a chance to adapt (as in a biological evolutionary sense) and innovate with a singular focus on student-centered learning that promotes student success, while closing equity gaps. Additionally, students need the sense of belonging and community, which are factors that enhance retention and outcomes. Along these lines, during the virtual town halls we heard one institution planning a “guerilla approach” to student success; we assume they are using a scalable, strategic approach, based on data- and evidence informed analytics, allied with training of faculty and staff to promote operational best practices

The world of higher education has changed. Maybe forever. Many institutions are dealing with unprecedented furloughs or layoffs, increasing demands on support staff, and challenges with work-life balance as they struggle to work from home and take care of families, particularly school age children.

In part as a result of the societal impacts, the COVID-19 crisis has made it clear that higher education is critically necessary, particularly because of the need to rebuild our social constructs and economies, resulting in the creation jobs and other enterprises contributing to societal well-being.

Higher education will need to reengineer itself, while retaining its fundamental purpose, i.e., ensuring student learning and closing equity gaps. The reengineering will require a(n) (re)analysis of institutional missions that is aligned with new business models, innovation and risk-taking without jeopardizing core operations, and cogent (risk) communications strategy.

There is no one recipe for success as colleges reopen and any institution planning on reopening will need to plan carefully for a socially distanced campus environment ([https://www.chronicle.com/article/Welcome-to-the-Socially/248850?cid=wcontentgrid\\_hp\\_1b](https://www.chronicle.com/article/Welcome-to-the-Socially/248850?cid=wcontentgrid_hp_1b)).

The summer and fall semesters will look different depending on the institution’s location and demographics. Multiple approaches are imaginable, including: exclusively on-campus or online educational programs; hybrid of the two models; small groups in small classes meeting on alternating days for in-class or experiential learning, practicums, and laboratory work, while large classes taught exclusively online, thus, reducing the prospect for “super-spreader” events; shortened terms so as to avoid the peak, fall travel/infective season; and myriad other approaches.

As colleges reopen, regardless of the mode of delivery of educational offerings—online versus on-campus, quality and accountability have to be the core concerns: success depends on promoting community and group interactions to ensure student learning outcomes by focusing on the fundamentals—advising, offering experiential learning opportunities and inculcating combination of technical, cognitive skills, along with the non-cognitive, essential skills, core competencies, such as critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills, helping with finances, helping create social networks, ensuring food security, offering housing, day-, and health-care support, inculcating transferrable skills—combined with single-minded use of data-informed predictive analytics and other digital tools.

Additionally, institutions might leverage technology in support of increasing student achievement and success, accommodate new educational models, including alternative credentialing, micro- and stacked-credentialing, badges, competency-based education, certificate programs, and other such strategies, promote data and evidence-informed approaches for continuous improvement in educational outcomes, promote strong and effective mentoring, training, and education of faculty in pedagogy that

takes into account the different modes of delivery—online versus on-campus—of educational content, enhance documented measurement of student learning outcomes and assessment, improve communications, and enhance transparency, invest in social content as a way of maintaining the sense of place and belonging for students and staff, reach out and work with the local communities to provide Internet access/broadband/Wi-Fi connectivity to students and families without.

Ultimately, success of institutions will require demonstrating the value proposition by creating a compelling case for why students must continue their education.

Institutions must in the time of COVID-19, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, “*... think anew and act anew.*”