Is Academic Innovation Mission Critical or *Crisis-Driven?*

Nine Questions That Matter (And Answers to Move Forward)

Peter D. Eckel
University of Pennsylvania,
Graduate School of Education

MJ Bishop
William E. Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation,
University System of Maryland

About the Authors

Peter Eckel, Ph.D., serves as Senior Fellow and Director of Leadership Programs at the Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD) in the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. His expertise focuses on managing and governing colleges and universities. He teaches in the Executive Doctorate Program in higher education management and the traditional higher education graduate program. He has taught in Penn GSE's Education Entrepreneurship program as well.

About Penn AHEAD
The Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD) is dedicated to advancing higher education policy and practice that fosters open, equitable, and democratic societies.

AHEAD achieves its mission by creating knowledge, improving practice, and building capacity. Through our engagement with policy-makers, institutional leaders, scholars and practitioners, AHEAD produces research and applies research-based knowledge to address the most pressing issues pertaining to the public purposes of higher education in the U.S. and around the globe.

Dr. M.J. Bishop, Ph. D., is Associate Vice Chancellor and inaugural director of the University System of Maryland's William E. Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation. As Director, Dr. Bishop is leading statewide initiatives in open educational resources, analytics, digital badging, adaptive learning, high-impact practices, academic integrity, and online education. Since coming to the USM in 2013, the Kirwan Center has been awarded grants totaling over $10M in support of a variety of initiatives aimed at exploring the role that state-level consortia can play in advancing institutional efforts to improve student success.

About William E. Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation
Established in 2013 by the University System of Maryland (USM) Board of Regents, the William E. Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation grew out of a need to keep pace with a rapidly changing technological landscape, student body, and higher education ecosystem. The Kirwan Center is creating a collaborative culture of academic innovation that catalyzes new ways of thinking about student success, translates ideas into action, and scales and sustains promising practices. The Kirwan Center leverages the power of multi-institutional collaboration to increase access, affordability, and achievement of high-quality credentials for Maryland students. Informed by the diversity of our higher education institutions, findings from the learning sciences, and capabilities of emerging technologies, the Center leads statewide efforts to implement, evaluate, and scale and sustain innovations aimed at student success.

Foreword

The Covid pandemic has and will continue to impact education broadly and deeply. **Catalyst @ Penn GSE**, a center for global education innovation at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, connects people and ideas to advance education in novel and meaningful ways. When we partnered with **StartEd** to co-produce **EDTECH WEEK 2020**, we envisioned a festival drawing hundreds of innovators, entrepreneurs, and educators to New York City.

As the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic became apparent and campuses around the world closed, our team pivoted. We transformed our in-person event into four days of remote learning and networking for the education community, using new and varied technology to enable the highest-quality human connection possible. We adapted the week to address the many challenges the pandemic posed to educators, students, and families.

In the midst of our planning, Black Lives Matters protests erupted across the country in response to the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others. We changed course once more to give our speakers and attendees a platform for frank conversations about inequities in education and how we create a better future.

Yet, education as an industry is not skilled at what that requires: academic innovation. To this end, we convened think tanks of preK-12 and higher education leaders.

This paper presents the outcomes of one such working group of college and university presidents and leaders of campus academic innovation. It is a roadmap for higher education leaders on what is possible and how they might think about leading innovation in this pivotal time. In the following pages, we sketch out the nine pressing questions and four potential solutions based on the insights and expertise of the assembled leaders.

The pandemic and antiracism movement have shone a spotlight on the vast inequities in education and the world. Educators will need to approach change with flexibility and openness, even in the face of fixed budgets, limited facilities, and political pressures. We offer this paper as an actionable framework to help leaders in higher education innovate for an equitable system.

Ultimately, more than 4,000 people signed-up for EDTECH WEEK 2020 to build a game plan for the future of education—together. We hope you will join us.

L. Michael Golden
Executive Director and Senior Fellow, Catalyst @ Penn GSE
Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania

To say the pandemic has turned higher education upside down is an understatement. Classes went 100% remote, students abruptly moved off campus, labs closed, student activities stalled, notions of community shifted, and we all became much more familiar with Zoom. Each and every college and university in the nation, and 99% of students world-wide according to the World Bank,[1] were forced into making adaptations. Higher education clearly changed in response to the pandemic.

But "change" is not the same as "innovation." Change tinkers within an existing structure and view of the world, whereas innovation involves new ways of doing things, questioning values and goals, and likely making structural alterations in current processes and systems. Innovation involves seeing the world in different ways, challenging assumptions, and moving forward accordingly.

Although higher education changed in response to the pandemic, can it innovate in ways that make lasting and positive impacts on teaching, learning, and the undergraduate experience? Will advances in academic innovation only be crisis-driven, with limited impact, or will they become mission critical?

But "change" is not the same as "innovation."

There are no simple answers to these questions, as was proven during a June 2020 think tank discussion among two- and four-year college and university presidents and leaders of academic innovation convened by the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education and the Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation at the University System of Maryland during the 2020 EdTech Week conference, co-produced by Catalyst@Penn GSE and StartEd. The discussion focused on teaching, learning, the undergraduate experience, and the challenges to and the pathways forward for innovation. We sought to bring together the leaders responsible for answering the most important questions on campus and those with potential solutions.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the group was unable to answer the posed question: is lasting and positive innovation a likely outcome, or is higher education saddled with responsive (or even knee-jerk) change? That said, the tenor of the conversation suggested that the question demands deeper and longer discussions, involving a wider group of individuals. As a starting point to this more fundamental conversation, the discussion surfaced nine questions.

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1 Covid-19's immense impact on equity in tertiary education. World Bank Blog.
https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/covid-19s-immense-impact-equity-tertiary-education

Nine Pressing Questions

How does higher education create equitable and just campuses?

The pandemic and the concurrent national reckoning with racism and violence against Black and Brown people following the killing of George Floyd by police sharply elevated the ongoing structural inequities within our communities, particularly within postsecondary education. "Equity and access issues are most critically important to address, ASAP," said one person. Another participant asked, "what would higher education look like if we really focused on those we have not served well?" The topic deemed most important and most challenging from the discussion was ensuring equity. This question is not new; advancing equity, removing bias and countering structural racism are even more complicated and more urgent given the pandemic. There is and should be a new sense of urgency for real progress and a widespread commitment to doing so.

How can colleges and universities address instructional inequity?

A realization emerged that the move online has evaporated much of the equity we often took for granted in our learning environments. As one person noted, "campus (and its classrooms) turns out to be a leveler as we see how hard it is for some students to learn from complicated homes…or no homes." When classes met in person, the physical learning environment (for the most part) was consistent for students: same room, same lighting, same temperature, same furniture, same noise level. Now that classes are virtual, the environment in which students are attempting to learn varies drastically. Yes, connectivity matters as does access to technology, but so do other environmental factors that contribute to learning. We took for granted the learning space equity provided by physical classrooms. Now that that doesn't exist and likely won't exist completely in the new academic year, how can campuses best respond?

What is the impact of new barriers between campus and community?

The great promise of technology-mediated education is to allow, as has been said many, many times, "anytime and anywhere learning." But while the pandemic has minimized one set of barriers, it has created others, particularly between the campuses and their communities. Colleges and universities are active players and economic engines in their communities. They provide services and opportunities such as musical and theatrical performances, childcare, spaces for athletics and leisure, health and wellness activities, continuing education, professional development for teachers and support for schools, literacy programs, and legal clinics, among others. This all has stopped or been drastically curtailed.

Communities furthermore become extensions of the classroom for service-learning courses, places to collect data and conduct research, host internships, and serve as clinical sites (think audiology, counseling, nursing, physical therapy and the like). The pandemic has put up new barriers that have limited or even eliminated such activities and pedagogical practices previously taken for granted. As the campus faces new difficult-to-penetrate borders, it loses much that it can contribute as well as gain.

How can we best support faculty as they work to innovate?

At the core of instructional innovation are faculty. Many faculty received high marks for their innovation and flexibility this past semester from presidents and academic innovators. These individuals responded quickly and with intention to the pandemic's challenges. Commented one person, "faculty are more ready than we [often] give them credit [for being]." They worked hard to ensure a high-quality, remote educational experience. And many faculty concurrently faced steep personal and family hurdles. Can this initial response be leveraged for future meaningful innovation?

The pandemic also shows that in a remote environment, it is extremely difficult to hide poor teaching and misaligned pedagogy. Furthermore, the challenges vary significantly from one academic discipline to the next. It is clear from this past semester that different faculty have different strengths and levels of comfort. One approach suggested by a participant is to think about faculty development along two dimensions in a matrix—high and low instructional sophistication and strong and weak technological skills. Faculty support can then be offered differently depending on strengths and areas in need of development.

How do institutions (re-)create the 24/7 educational experience for remote learning?

The requests—and lawsuits—for tuition refunds are telling. Most students clearly see their educational experience as so much more than classroom-based: peer engagements, mentoring relationships, late night discussions and informal study groups, hands-on projects, leadership development opportunities, and even walks across campus with friends. The pandemic has shown that recreating these elements are challenging. Students hunger for such experiences and are disappointed and frustrated when they feel shortchanged. Although much intention goes into crafting student experiences, there are other organic elements to the postsecondary learning experience that emerge without planning and also are important. "How can we ensure the continued social development of students?" asked one president. While, with care, most institutions can create a virtual classroom, creating a virtual environment that cultivates these organic experiences requires a different level of thought, attention, creativity and rigor. Can we create anything even remotely similar?

How can higher education collaborate differently to address a shared challenge?

Said one president, "we are working to address a collective problem (the pandemic) but doing so almost on an individual institutional basis." Our old ways of working as mostly independent institutions, even for universities that are part of state-wide systems, may not allow for adequate responses to the pandemic's challenges and opportunities. We may need national solutions at scale to bring about meaningful change locally. What would a "National Clearinghouse of Academic Innovation Solutions" look like? Can existing consortia and professional organizations operate anew? Many, such as the Association of Independent Colleges of Art and Design (AICAD), as one president described, are doing just that, as are more innovative state systems. However, these efforts may also be insufficient at modest scale as their resources and attention are limited.

How can we ensure sufficient forward progress?

While some faculty and students have begun down the road of academic innovation, others are feeling as if on a forced march—yearning for the time when things "get back to normal." As one person noted, "I expect many are never going to want to look at Zoom again." Although many recognize that the potential for meaningful academic innovation is not limited to Zoom, moderating the pace of change, giving people the time and space to develop and test new approaches, and ensuring significant resources and support scaffolding will be important to ensure sustainable innovation. Said one person during the discussion, it is "very hard to get people interested in innovation when they are exhausted. There is a need for empathy and patience." Yet, at the same time, there is a great urgency and a momentum for progress.

What is the new value proposition of a postsecondary education?

These realizations and tensions then raise questions about an institution's value proposition. As one person said, "What are students really paying for?" And another asked, "Can tuition be sustained when students do not have the full campus experience?" Many institutional leaders are anticipating downturns in enrollments as students believe they cannot get what they seek at the price point offered. How robust are institutional finances to cope with such a shock? However, value isn't simply about money. The pandemic is surfacing deeper questions about what is higher education for; who does it serve; and what are the public perceptions of who benefits and in what ways?

Can we ask fundamental questions about higher education?

Finally, the pandemic and the responses of colleges and universities, successful and not, are surfacing a host of other questions that higher education has not yet addressed, but may need to. Now may be that time, and if not now, then soon. Some additional questions posed by participants include:

- "Will there be a "winner take all" moment? Are we going to see closures and consolidations? Will the U.S. lose institutional diversity, such as many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)?"

- "Why do we think of the undergraduate experience as 18- to 22-year-olds, and at one point in time for four years? How does that thinking impact how we view the baccalaureate?"

- "Is it time to revisit the credit hour as the instructional standard? What would we replace it with? What would be that impact?"

- "Should we rethink disciplinary boundaries and their stranglehold, as well as the 60-year old general education model?"

Forward Progress, But Slow

Participants were surprised by the level of agreement between presidents and academic innovation leaders. As one person commented, "It is amazing the extent to which we've converged so quickly around the issues and problems... We were aware of these issues before... but we [were only] crawling toward solutions." The real work is to implement solutions that address the challenges quickly and on a meaningful scale. And to do so without a clear path forward.

To overcome longstanding and newly emergent barriers and take advantage of the current situation, four solutions emerged as essential to creating lasting and positive innovation:

- **Altering institutional structures and processes**. Responded one person, "Our structures tend to get in the way—budgets, reward systems, traditional undergraduate education [curricula], collective bargaining." The systems postsecondary institutions have developed, often to solve other problems, become conserving activities and reinforce the status quo. Accreditation standards and requirements sometimes reinforce these existing systems and approaches. Making meaningful progress will mean addressing these elements and removing or minimizing disincentives in the system.

- **Engaging students differently**. The language of "student agency" was interwoven throughout the conversation. How we engage students and the ways in which we empower their learning efficacy will matter.

- **Learning the important lessons from this ongoing situation**. This spring, institutions changed with a speed and breadth that was historic. But, as one president asked, "What have we learned so far? How can we build on what we have gained to continue to move forward and not simply revert to how we were before the pandemic?"

- **Finding ways to sustain and accelerate the energy and creativity**. The key question, according to one participant, is "how to bring about change under duress? Design requires optimism. That is in short supply right now." Articulating the positive changes that have occurred and collecting data about the real problems that remain will be important to continuing momentum.

Conclusion: Requiring A New Collective

The purpose of this discussion was to bring together two- and four-year college and university presidents and leaders of academic innovation with the intent of finding common ground and laying the foundation for new work on campuses that advances academic innovation. The discussion demonstrated, however, that we had framed the conversation around the wrong question. The question to be asked is not *whether,* but *how* can advances in academic innovation become mission critical?

We believe making this shift will require a set of intentional next steps both on campus and throughout higher education. Innovation requires a human-centered perspective, a diverse team, experimentation and structured iteration, a willingness to learn while failing, and the investment of time and resources. It will not be easy, but it is necessary.

First, those leading academic innovation efforts must convey clearly to presidents, provosts, and other senior leaders how they can help address institutional challenges, like those articulated above. They need to demonstrate solutions to well-understood, if not intractable, problems. But they must be wary of selling solutions without making the case for why their solutions matter, and can matter at scale, and with a clear return on investment. How they communicate and what they communicate are equally important.

Asking questions is how we begin this journey together.

Second, presidents and other university leaders must identify what solutions they are willing to bring to bear; the types and levels of investments they are willing to make in higher education's future; the risks they are willing to take; and how they will engage consistently for the long-haul.

Third, nothing is accomplished in the academy without collaboration; this is particularly true of academic innovation focused on teaching and learning. Finding new ways, in this time of disruption and uncertainty, to bring together faculty, department chairs, academic innovation leaders, and senior campus leaders for novel discussions will be important. And for too many institutions, this will be done under strained relationships given the pressures administrators and faculty are facing.

Finally, national organizations must rethink the support they provide to institutions. As mentioned above, college and university leaders feel their institutions are isolated as they work to address the pandemic. Such isolation will only slow efforts to advance further academic innovation.

Academic innovation is more than novel technology, Zoom calls, and pandemic responses. Higher education will best be served with intention and thought, data to inform approaches, and creativity and professional judgement supported by the necessary infrastructure. Asking questions is how we begin this journey together. ∎

Think Tank Participants

We thank the following individuals who participated in the EdTech Week think tank:

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Elissa Tenny, President, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Derrick Tillman Kelly, Director of UAI Fellows, Program and Network Engagement
Rebecca Wyke, President, University of Maine at Augusta

Conveners

Peter Eckel
Senior Fellow and Director of Leadership Programs, Penn AHEAD
Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania

MJ Bishop
Associate Vice Chancellor and Director, William E. Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation
University System of Maryland

L. Michael Golden
Executive Director and Senior Fellow, Catalyst @ Penn GSE
Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania

Ben Greenwald
Coordinator, Catalyst @ Penn GSE
Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania