

The Essentiality of Public-Private Partnerships

They are vital for regional state universities to further their missions and thrive in the future, writes Ashish Vaidya.

It is said that crises don't change things so much as accelerate what was already underway. That is certainly true for the pandemic's impact on higher education and online learning. Before the pandemic, one-third of all undergraduates were already enrolled in online classes, and the number of college students taking online classes had grown for 14 straight years. Based on what colleges and universities around the country have already announced about fall reopenings, digital instruction is about to grow significantly.

But the effect of the crisis on how higher education must operate extends well beyond technology-enhanced teaching and learning. Institutions must accept that the pandemic has, finally, made it impossible to ignore the rising urgency of much-needed structural transformation. Most notably, where the cost of education was already distressing families prior to the crisis, this semester's disruptive move to off-campus instruction has called into question institutional business models. When families are

reluctant to pay deposits and colleges and universities nationwide are struggling to find the resources to address upheaval, changes in how higher education institutions operate can no longer be put off.

On the upside, the pandemic has driven state and national consortia of colleges and universities to communicate, plan, and manage together as never before around PPE, health-and-safety procedures, legal issues, and more. We must capitalize on this unprecedented cooperation to meet families' economic distress, reduce costs, improve efficiencies and expand access to quality education. Strategic partnerships are awaiting us, and we must act.

At my institution, Northern Kentucky University, for instance, we're extending our history of serving the region's economic needs by creating public-private partnerships that provide additional points of access to learners and ensure they succeed in earning a credential.

Before the pandemic, Northern Kentucky was already

working with Academic Partnerships, an online facilitator, to increase our undergraduate- and graduate-level online degree offerings in workforce relevant programs. In just two years, while we continued to control admissions standards, the curriculum and overall quality, Academic Partnerships helped grow our online enrollment exponentially, from 170 students in spring 2018 to nearly 3,000 this spring. When the pandemic arrived, those results proved especially beneficial in our transition to teaching through technology, overcoming faculty skepticism about online learning, and providing an important revenue stream outside traditional on-campus education.

The prospect of building on such partnerships is especially crucial for regional state colleges and universities like mine, which educate nearly 50 percent of all undergraduates in the United States but are disproportionately dependent on dwindling aid from state governments with limited access to alternative revenue sources. These 400 regional institutions, which compose the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, together serve the largest number of Pell Grant-eligible, low-income, first-generation, and historically underserved students in the country. As such, we play a disproportionate role in boosting economic and social mobility everywhere. That includes our massive role in educating students who are typically older and working full-time jobs.

Partnerships work especially well in meeting the myriad needs of such diverse students. For example, our partnership with the Kroger Company, based in nearby Cincinnati, was formed because of our common goal to address food insecurity. The issue impacts up to 30 percent of our students who rely on our on-campus food pantry for their meals and necessities. The Kroger partnership allowed us to move the pantry to a space seven times larger than the original location. It's stocked with fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthy offerings and aligns with Kroger's goal to achieve zero hunger and zero waste in the communities they serve by 2025.

Since 2012, our partnership with Education at Work, a nonprofit organization that connects college students to companies so they graduate with less debt, has employed more than 350 of our students with a global financial services client. These students are learning career-enhancing skills while minimizing their debt.

More than half of the students in the program hired full time are Northern Kentucky graduates, many from underrepresented backgrounds who are the first in their family to go to college.

As our state's need for physicians and telemedicine has grown, we've forged a partnership with the University of Kentucky and St. Elizabeth Healthcare to establish a regional campus of the UK College of Medicine. Last fall, we welcomed the first cohort of 35 students, and it's only the beginning.

We are seeing these alliances elsewhere, as well, which will lead to better student outcomes. The University of Central Florida has partnered with Microsoft to enhance its digital learning environment and build a virtual and augmented reality innovation lab for students and researchers. Frostburg State University in Maryland has collaborated with HelioCampus to help the institution better understand data on student enrollment and success.

The key to such partnerships has been finding the overlap in our respective institutional missions. Academic Partnerships, for example, shares our goal of increasing student access, affordability and ultimately student success, with offerings that allow students to pay by the course. Kroger's goal to help end hunger has met an urgent student need. Our medical college partners share our focus on health innovation and desire to solve our state's shortage of physicians. And Education at Work's mission aligns with our desire to create employment pathways for college students.

Partnerships like these are paramount to the future of higher education. They deliver new services efficiently, meet vital student interests, respond to local urgencies and leverage assets of different types of institutions around a common purpose. In doing so, they lift up students and prioritize a greater good. They are, in other words, just what success rising out of a pandemic requires.

For regional public colleges, partnerships may even be the key to survival. As grim as so much of this crisis has been, it has also provided clarity on the need to embrace new solutions to the goals that we all share -- including educational, economic and social prosperity for learners of every kind, at every stage of their lives.

Ashish Vaidya is president of Northern Kentucky University.