

Back to School...Or Not.

How the COVID Delta Variant is Upending Universities' Plans to Reopen This Fall

In December 2020, morale in the United States was as low as it has been in decades. We had been living in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic for almost nine months, and hundreds of millions of Americans were concerned about contracting a disease that had already killed more than 300,000 of their fellow citizens. Schools were closed, most businesses were under severe restrictions or were completely shuttered, and seemingly simple things like going to parks or visiting family were fraught with danger. And then on December 14, it all changed. On that day, Americans began receiving doses of a new [coronavirus vaccine](#), which had been developed and deployed in record time. The first people to get the shot were healthcare workers in New York City, which had been severely affected by the first wave of the pandemic, but over the next five months millions of other people received vaccines. It seemed that the pandemic was finally on the verge of being over.

This was great news for everyone, but few institutions were as bolstered by the good news as colleges, which had been forced to shut down abruptly in March 2020 as the pandemic raised across the United States. Schools cobbled together emergency plans to provide online classes, but literally every aspect of higher education was fundamentally disrupted by COVID-19. Not only did the illness affect classroom education, but it also had major repercussions for administrative functions, ranging from registering for classes to applying for financial aid. That's because in the absence of physical appointments on campus, administrators had to do everything through emails and Zoom calls.



Needless to say, this was anything but easy, but resourceful professionals were able to implement solutions on the fly, and in the process meet the needs of millions of students around the country. And as more and more Americans got vaccinated throughout the spring of 2021, it looked like everything was going to return to normal – or pretty close to normal – by the time the fall semester rolled around. In fact, many schools began to host athletic events and even in-person classes because victory appeared to be in sight.

Then came the Delta Variant of COVID, which has made everyone rethink what the future of the pandemic will look like. Infection rates are up in more than 30 states, which is compounded by a national vaccination rate of under 50%. This is creating a perfect storm that may well push the United States back into a so-called “fourth wave” of the virus. We are already seeing the first stage of the public health response to this uptick in cases, highlighted by the city of Los Angeles requiring masks in public after several months of almost no restrictions. After three months of optimism, we are now looking at a potential return to where we were last winter.

This bodes poorly for college and university administrators, who after nearly a year of wading through uncharted waters were finally looking forward to something approaching pre-pandemic life. Most of the systems that were deployed over the last year were implemented on a temporary basis under the assumption that the worst would pass and that everyone would be returning to the classroom this fall. But these temporary solutions may be needed for much longer than initially anticipated. Welcome to the new normal, where the improvised fixes of 2020 are the ongoing reality for 2021. And while none of us has a crystal ball, it's safe to say that the opening of institutions of higher education this autumn is going to be a lot rockier than anyone envisioned even two months ago.



So that's the bad news. On the other hand, a lot of the solutions that were developed and implemented over the last 18 months worked incredibly well – far better than anyone had anticipated. Distance learning programs had a few glitches at the beginning (remember Zoom streakers?), but for the last 12 months most students and professors have adapted pretty well to remote learning. This also applies to test taking, which has made the transition from the physical world into the digital realm.

Outside of the classroom, the stopgap measures that universities implemented to keep their institutions running seem to be holding up. This includes everything from virtual graduations to creating opportunities for students to interact with each other through their computers and mobile devices. And Qless has been a major player in helping colleges and universities around the world manage the most difficult and labor-intensive functions, including financial aid, the registrar's office, admissions, advising, student services, and more.



In a pre-COVID world, students lined up to enter these offices in person to receive the appropriate paperwork and fill out the right forms. Even though computers were involved, it tended to be a very time-intensive process because so much had to be done in person. March 2020 changed all that, and for the first time the entire process went 100% digital. As it turned out, Qless turned out to be the “power tool” to make all of this possible.

Qless was already in use by a number of schools to manage physical lines, so the technology was well understood by universities even before the pandemic hit. As soon as the world changed, administrators were able to seamlessly adapt the platform to enable virtual lines that enabled students to connect one-on-one with higher education professionals from home. Not only did this prove to be useful to schools that were already using Qless, but a whole new community of colleges throughout the United States and around the world signed up to become Qless users.

There is no one tool that is magically going to make universities pandemic-proof, especially as virus rates go up in many states. But a creative approach to technology can go a long way to help mitigate some of the risks that students and administrators face when it comes to accomplishing their goals. Qless is proud to play a role in helping them get there.

CAMPUS REOPENING:

WHAT WILL COLLEGES DO THIS FALL?

With only 49 percent* of the U.S. population fully vaccinated and the Delta variant surging, going back to campus in the fall may not be what we expected. Early in the year, colleges were feeling optimistic that the 2021 fall semester would signal a return to normal, but as we get closer to campus reopening, many colleges are again being forced to reconsider how students and staff interact and learn. Here are some of the trends we're seeing in U.S. campuses.

Enrolments



Student-visa issuance is returning to pre-pandemic levels, with almost **117,000 F-1** student visas approved in May and June.



43 percent of colleges report an increase in their international student applications for the 2021/22 academic year.



Spring 2021 semester saw the largest college enrollment decline in a decade, with an overall college enrollment decline of **3.5 percent**.

Masks

[Masking](#) will remain the norm at most campuses at least through the end of 2021.

The CDC is now recommending that vaccinated Americans wear masks indoors due to the highly transmissible Delta variant, which will impact colleges.



Learning



86 percent of institutions are planning some type of in-person study in fall 2021.



The University of California system plans to return to primarily in-person learning, but will release plans and protocols on a per campus basis for its 10 campuses.



Brown University is preparing to return to campus, but will make all course materials available online or in hybrid format.



Most institutions are indicating that a total return to in-person instruction and on-campus activities will depend on several factors, including a downward trend in the virus.

Physical Distancing

1. Social distancing measures remain dependent on the university. [Boston University](#) said students should be able to return this fall to classrooms without the social distancing protocols that have been in place since last September.

2. The CDC suggests that physical distancing is not necessary for fully vaccinated students, faculty, and staff on campus.

3. CDC recommends continued physical distancing for people with weakened immune systems.



Learning

✓ **607 campuses** have vaccine requirements for students and staff, most of which are private schools.

✓ As the leading national college health organization, **ACHA** will provide resources and tools to help campuses increase vaccine uptake among students.

✓ **64 percent** of colleges plan to provide COVID-19 vaccines to students, faculty, and staff on campus.

Although we're mere months away from colleges reopening, many institutes are still unsure of how to handle the Fall 2021 semester — especially with low vaccination rates and COVID-19 cases spiking. Public health strategies — such as masking, physical distancing, testing and contact tracing — will still be needed to avoid campus outbreaks and hotspots. As colleges consider the return to campus, priority needs to be placed on staff and student safety.

To keep staff and students safe this semester, consider Qless for your physical distancing and queue management needs.

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