

# Are You Ready for a Fully Hybrid Model?

## Not Just Classes, But Everything

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced colleges and universities into a remote learning model for the spring semester. Now, most institutions are considering innovative models for their fall semester, such as a mix of smaller, in-person classes and online courses. Because even an optimistic timeframe for a vaccine is more than a year away, these hybrid models will last long past 2020, forever changing the higher education landscape.

### Support for Remote Workers is Vital

Much of the COVID discussion in higher education has centered around online learning, which is fitting since their purpose is to educate students. However, institutions have numerous departments that support the organization's learning mission.

While online learning is not a new concept, with many institutions using it before the pandemic, remote working for staff was often just an occasional offering, not a full-time work-from-home model. Like other industries, a lot of higher education administrators believed that staff working in the same space was a driver for high productivity, especially for staff who worked directly with students. Yet, the spring 2020 semester has shown that location is not the only factor for staff output; technology, communication, and collaboration play immense roles.

With the pandemic, entire campuses must be able to support online capabilities. In addition to students, staff across admissions, advising, payroll, accounting, and other departments must be able to work from home. For example, [Penn State recently stated that it will bring back staff in phases](#). The last group to return to campus will be employees who can fulfill work responsibilities remotely. Meanwhile, some employees may continue to work remotely for the foreseeable future.

While many higher education institutions already had remote capabilities possible for staff, others had to quickly adapt when physical locations were shut down in the spring. Many institutions were severely hampered with outdated operational models in which nearly everything was managed on-premises and could not easily transition online.

### Engaging Students Outside of the Virtual Classroom

The difference between schools that thrive in the COVID era rather than muddle through is the ability to engage students outside of the virtual classroom. Communicating with students is crucial to their success, especially during these uncertain times.

Students want and need regular, relevant, and insightful communications. Schools should utilize a mix of email, text, and online chat solutions that students can access via their mobile devices.

Chatbots in particular can be highly advantageous as higher education becomes more digitalized. Institutions can help students combat anxiety brought about by COVID-19 by offering 24/7/365 access to services or personnel that can answer specific questions about health procedures, financial aid, event signups, and more.

Meanwhile, granting students the ability to register for classes, pay their bills, connect with advisors, manage academic plans, and more from anywhere at any time can help drive engagement and satisfaction.

While communication is critical, many students also learn and gain experience outside of the classroom. Positive interactions with fellow students and staff and participation in extracurricular programs can support long-term personal development. Institutions that can find ways to improve student engagement in these types of activities will see a much greater level of success.

### Hybrid Models Necessitate Cloud-Based Infrastructure

The upheaval from COVID-19 has caused significant concerns about revenue plummeting from tuition freezes, retention issues, and enrollment declines. Institutions must persevere, not only teach but to attract, support, and retain students no matter where staff and students reside. An on-premises IT infrastructure can be tremendously taxed from mass remote working, resulting in a downgraded online experience and loss of productivity for staff.

Success in a hybrid mode will require a robust cloud-based infrastructure that enables greater flexibility, scalability, and the security necessary to meet the demands of remote learners and staff. With students and staff logging in to networks that may house sensitive information from myriad devices, institutions need to ensure their infrastructure can support and protect this influx of traffic across different channels.

With online learning, institutions must be able to support students who utilize personal devices to access crucial information, whether to check on their financial aid status, get help from their advisor, or confirm their paycheck from an on-campus job. Likewise, staff must have mobile access to information to stay on top of their functional tasks such as accessing student, accounting, and human resources data. A cloud-based, mobile-ready infrastructure can help institutions achieve these goals and prevent administrative functions from grinding to a halt.

The cloud can also deliver enhanced security, which is vital as students and staff access institutional data remotely. In a hybrid model with so many folks off-site, it is understandable for security concerns to be high. However, cloud infrastructure offers multiple layers of encryption to mitigate cybercriminal activity as well as inadvertent data loss. When data is stored in the cloud, sensitive information is stored on a centralized platform that is managed through role-based access.

Additionally, the cloud is inherently more scalable than static on-premises servers. If ever there was a test for scalability, it happened when the learning world transitioned to online. Schools with cloud-based infrastructure were often more successful in scaling and expanding their communications. However, many institutions did not have the infrastructure in place for administrative functions to scale remotely, which brought about fire drills and crises management exercises. While most schools conduct email outreach for enrollment, for example, many lack full online capabilities for staff to attract, engage, nurture, and track prospective students on channels outside of email.

In these turbulent times, institutions require new levels of agility and responsiveness to serve the needs and expectations of their students and staff. Barriers for creating flexible learning and work options must be removed and replaced with digital systems and new mentalities that can enable better experiences to users on and off campus.

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