

COVID on Campus: How Universities Are Coping

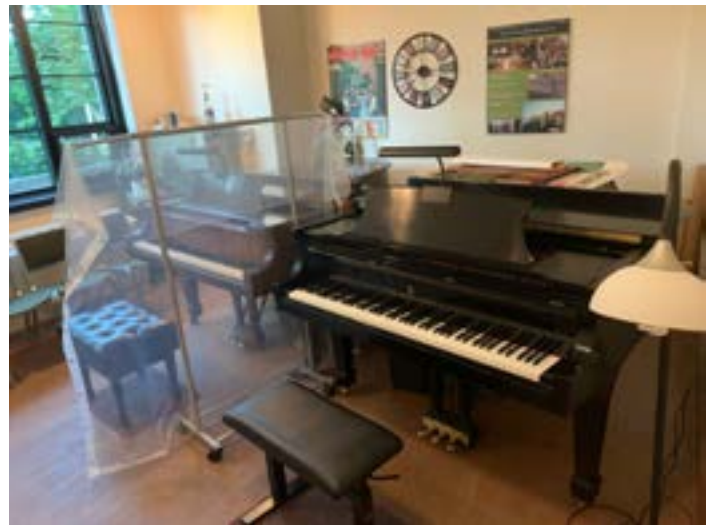
By Amy Running, IIDA, NCIDQ, LEED BD+C / August 27, 2020

It's a challenging time to be in academia right now. Just last week Michigan State University and Stanford joined many other higher learning institutions we work with to mandate remote learning for fall, and the University of Oregon recently followed suit for in-person classes. While just a few institutions have begun their fall semester, many do not start for a few more weeks. We have been connecting with four of our higher education clients across the country to hear how they are coping with the constant changes, and to learn about the long-term effects COVID is having on their campuses.

Of these projects, three include new buildings slated to open this fall: the University of Oregon Knight Campus for Accelerating Scientific Impact (Eugene, Oregon), the Michigan State University School of Music (East Lansing, Michigan), and the Texas A&M University Innovative Learning Classroom Building (College Station, Texas). These buildings remain on track to open, although for some like the Knight Campus building, the opening will be celebrated virtually. We will also look at a space planning project with the Stanford Psychology department that plans to resume this fall after having been paused last spring to accommodate online learning.

Each of these institutions has been scrambling to make plans for this fall. As the new school year is upon us, they again are adjusting to the constantly changing situation. Is flexibility in both space and policy the key ingredient for the fall semester? Will all this be temporary, or will it have farther-reaching implications?

Stanford University in Santa Clara County, California, where cases over the last 14 days surpassed 3,100, had been "working on plans, alternate plans, and alternates to the alternate plans for months," noted Shannon Silva, Facilities and Capital Planning for Stanford's School of Humanities and Sciences. Stanford had been focusing on prioritizing the freshman arrival to campus, but given the COVID resurgence, just last week the University made the call to move nearly all undergraduate instruction to remote learning and shuttered on-campus living. Our



(Top) Occupancy is reduced to 30-40% capacity at Texas A&M's Innovative Classroom Building, which opened last week. (Bottom) Curtain dividers at the new MSU School of Music allow ensembles to practice together.

space planning project for Stanford's Psychology Department is able to resume despite the remote learning shift, but is greatly impacted by COVID. Given that the majority of the department's research is conducted in-person on campus—seeing more than 100,000 subjects a year throughout the building at all hours—our planning work will need to shift to accommodate a much more precautionary approach.

Michigan State University's School of Music faced the added challenge of opening a music school within an airborne virus pandemic. Singers and those

who play wind instruments require additional space beyond the recommended 6-foot spacing, and larger musical groups such as orchestras have an even greater puzzle to solve to rehearse together. While the building's newly renovated spaces and new sound system could have allowed sections of the orchestra to rehearse in separate spaces connected by live sound feedback, it could not have fully replaced the experiential value of practicing with everyone in the same space. Practice space, critical to a music major's work, had already been subdivided by plastic curtains to allow for duos or small ensembles to practice together. But now, remote learning moves four to six hours a day of practice back to a home environment—a challenge for many students.

While it may involve more portable instruments, the research housed at the Knight Campus for Accelerating Scientific Impact (KCASI) at the University of Oregon is not something that can be done in a home environment. Research institutions across the country are working to create protocols for spaces that must continue to operate during closures. At UO, masks must be used in conjunction



Highly sensitive research environments such as those of the UO KCASI, where work must be done on-site, pose a particular challenge.

with the University's required safety equipment, including eye protection and gloves. Many institutions are opting to minimize human contact by limiting or staggering the lab time of individual researchers. In highly sensitive research environments, researchers themselves are wiping down high-touch surfaces after use. Fortunately for the newer teaching-style labs at KCASI, instructors can easily capture physical teaching tools via multiple camera locations to facilitate distance learning.

Texas A&M University's new Innovative Classroom Building opened its doors to classes last week. This facility includes our most innovative teaching configurations to-date, along with a generous number of informal learning spaces to support both small group work and gathering. Due to COVID, the group spaces have been limited in capacity, and large lobby spaces that included informal seating are now just generous circulation areas allowing for the expanded 30-minute class changes Texas A&M has added to space out foot traffic. Seating capacity in the innovative classrooms has been reduced to about 30-40% of what was initially planned, with fixed seats numbered so that students are not using the same seats back-to-back and to allow for each seat's deep cleaning post-use.

While many institutions are making what are hoped to be temporary changes to spacing, labeling or usage, the biggest challenge ahead will be bridging the divide between those who are in-person on campus and those who are attending classes virtually. This hybrid will likely continue for some time and may make a longer-term impact on how instructors deliver materials, how students collaborate on projects, and even what socialization looks like.

As we've seen this past year, much is out of our control and only time will tell. And in a climate in which there are more questions than answers, where educators are doing their best to be nimble and students and trying their hardest to be resilient, perhaps the only definitive thing is this: the 2020/2021 school year will be a year like no other. ■



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