

Planning for Academic Continuity: A Guide for Academic Leaders



About this report

This guide presents results from an analysis of 100 academic continuity plans at U.S. colleges and universities. The results form the basis for recommended academic continuity plan best practices, tools, and templates academic leaders can use to maintain a plan that can be used in both short-term and long-term circumstances. As suggested by the title, we believe that digital learning tools and platforms provide a solution for moving learning environments online in times of academic disruption.¹ But they also play a bigger role in academic continuity planning. Plans housed on institutional websites and in the institution's learning management system (LMS) are easily accessible to stakeholders at the institution including faculty and students. Training modules for developing and carrying out academic continuity plans can also be housed on the website and the LMS. Digital learning is not an all-inclusive solution to academic disruption, but it is essential to two top institutional concerns revealed by our analysis: communication with students and delivery of course content and assessments.

Acknowledgements

Authors: Patricia O'Sullivan, Robert McGuire, Chidinmma Egemonu, Eduardo Frausto, and Emma Sullivan

Interviewees: Jeffrey Hescoek, Executive Director of Environmental Health & Safety and Emergency Management and Co-Director Public Health Promotion Center and Environmental Health & Safety at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Tom Cavanagh, Vice Provost for Digital Learning at the University of Central Florida

Jody Green, Associate Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning at the University of California, Santa Cruz

Michael Tassio, Director of Digital Learning and Engagement at the University of California, Santa Cruz

Designer: Christie Forgette

Recommended citation: O'Sullivan, P., McGuire, R., Egemonu, C., Frausto, E., & Sullivan, E. (2023). *Planning for Academic Continuity: A Guide for Academic Leaders*. Every Learner Everywhere. <https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/resources/planning-for-academic-continuity/>.

About Every Learner Everywhere

Every Learner Everywhere is a network of partner organizations with expertise in evaluating, implementing, scaling, and measuring the efficacy of education technologies, curriculum and course design strategies, teaching practices, and support services that personalize instruction for students in blended and online learning environments. Our mission is to help institutions use new technology to innovate teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of improving learning outcomes for Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, poverty-affected students, and first-generation students. Our collaborative work aims to advance equity in higher education centered on the transformation of postsecondary teaching and learning. We build capacity in colleges and universities to improve student outcomes with digital learning through direct technical assistance, timely resources and toolkits, and ongoing analysis of institutional practices and market trends. For more information about Every Learner Everywhere and its collaborative approach to equitizing higher education through digital learning, visit [everylearnereverywhere.org](https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction	4
A. What is an academic continuity plan?	5
B. Why should schools have an academic continuity plan?	7
II. Review of continuity plans	8
A. Results of our analysis	8
B. Key strategies	14
III. Resources	18
A. Academic disruption assessment tool	19
B. Academic continuity plan template	21
C. Institutional digital tools audit worksheet	25
D. Links and summaries to exemplar academic continuity plans	26
IV. Conclusion	27
V. Appendices: Institutional Profiles	28
A. University of Central Florida	28
B. University of California Santa Cruz	31
C. University of Massachusetts, Amherst	35



INTRODUCTION

In the early evening of September 11, 2001, World Trade Center 7 collapsed onto Borough of Manhattan Community College's (BMCC) Fiterman Hall, which housed a third of the college's classroom space. Although other BMCC buildings remained intact, the loss of facilities combined with their proximity to Ground Zero—the World Trade Center site—made it impossible to resume classes until three weeks later.²

Students were moving in, but classes had not yet started at Tulane University in the fall 2005 term when a mandatory evacuation of New Orleans forced Tulane to relocate 400+ students to Jackson State University in Mississippi. Though university leaders anticipated being closed for a week or two at most, Hurricane Katrina caused so much damage to the city and campus that Tulane's students did not return to campus until January 2006.³

While both BMCC and Tulane University survived and were rebuilt, managing institutional operations during and after was difficult. Most of the population did not yet have mobile phones, and the smartphone was in its earliest stage of development. Additionally, learning management systems and online education were in their early stages of adoption and sophistication. The loss of the physical classroom left these schools with no way for faculty to communicate with students, much less teach them.

While mobile communication and digital learning tools are widely used today on U.S. campuses, these tools have limited use in times of academic disruption without a plan on how to use them to maintain or resume academic operations. Having digital learning tools available to faculty is not useful if those individuals don't know how to use them, and digital learning tools do not serve students who cannot afford to access them.

Academic continuity planning is an essential component of the business continuity plans of colleges and universities, and yet hundreds of schools were not prepared for the months-long academic disruption caused by lockdowns in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The national state of

emergency due to the pandemic was in place for over three years. At that time, schools developed academic continuity plans to meet the public health crisis at hand. However, even though the national state of emergency has now been lifted, many schools have not taken the opportunity to revise their academic continuity plan to one that can serve in a variety of scenarios of academic disruption.

In this guide we will share with readers the results of an analysis of 100 academic continuity plans and summarize the best practices for developing a versatile plan while providing resources that are aligned with your institution’s resources.

A. WHAT IS AN ACADEMIC CONTINUITY PLAN?

Academic continuity planning can be traced back to World War II, when universities in France began offering distance learning courses to students evacuated because of war conditions. This alternative to face-to-face learning relied on the mail system for communication between faculty and students.⁴ More recently, the University of Hong Kong shifted to distance learning during the 2003 SARS epidemic. However, it was in 2005—in the wake of Hurricane Katrina—that scaled solutions for academic disruption were paired with new digital learning technologies in an effort to develop the Sloan Semester, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation through the Sloan Consortium (now the Online Learning Consortium or OLC). Ray Schroeder, Director of the Office of Technology-Enhanced Learning at the University of Illinois at Springfield, “developed a business continuation emergency plan at the Springfield campus to deliver online courses in the event of a disaster.”⁵ The Sloan Semester was based on Schroeder’s plan, and offered free online classes to students displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

“The strategy was to use online learning – utilizing a specialized version of [the Southern Regional Education Board] SREB’s Electronic Campus courses from colleges and universities from across the country – including SREB’s new online VESA (Visiting Electronic Student Authorization) application to provide students with a quick and easy way to enroll in courses.”⁶

-Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Plan



Between October 2005 and January 2006, “800 courses offered by 135 institutions from 36 states wound up enrolling Sloan Semester students.”⁷ However, despite the explosive growth in online learning in the nearly 20 years since Hurricane Katrina, schools affected by wildfires, floods, and hurricanes still tended to cancel classes rather than move classes online. Faculty, students, and administrators felt that face-to-face learning was superior to online learning, even though several studies have disproved this notion.^{8,9,10}

When the COVID-19 virus reached the U.S. in January 2020, and health officials urged schools to suspend in-person classes/gatherings, colleges and universities had the tools to continue teaching and learning. However, many schools didn’t have a plan for how to use those tools or quickly train faculty and students to use them to maintain academic continuity. The learning curve was steep, with many faculty members and students realizing, for the first time, just how different online and virtual learning is from the face-to-face classroom experience. But with the help of academic professionals in IT, online learning, and centers for teaching and learning among others, most colleges and universities were able to maintain academic continuity without access to physical classroom spaces for the duration of 2020—and well into 2021 in some cases.

The COVID-19 pandemic was unlike other academic disruption events in that it did not damage or destroy campus facilities. However, similar to disruptions caused by hurricanes, wildfires, and floods, some members of campus communities were displaced, many suffered from physical and mental distress, and some even lost their lives. For many, the worst part of the COVID-19 disruption was how long it impacted normal operations. Even schools that went back to face-to-face teaching in the fall 2020 term had to manage accommodations for faculty and students at risk.

There is an understandable eagerness to move on from the pandemic and return to normal operations. Many schools have removed their academic continuity plans from their website’s most public-facing pages, or archived them entirely. Among those schools that still have public-facing academic continuity plans, a majority of them still feature COVID-19 protocols. Some schools, however, have developed entirely new plans to manage a variety of disruptions to academic continuity.



Academic continuity plans (also called academic contingency plans) are a set of policies, procedures, recommendations, and resources to guide faculty in mitigating disruptions to teaching and learning during a facilities, personnel, or public health emergency of extended duration.¹¹

B. WHY SHOULD SCHOOLS HAVE AN ACADEMIC CONTINUITY PLAN?

Simply put, schools with academic continuity plans are in a much stronger position to manage times of crisis and disruption.

In the wake of Hurricane Ian, which made landfall on September 28, 2022, some Florida colleges and universities shifted to remote learning as campus leaders assessed the damage and determined whether or not it was safe to reopen. Following the brutal murder of four students during the fall 2022 term, and with the killer still at large, the University of Idaho offered students the option to take classes remotely. Ongoing water quality issues in Jackson, Mississippi, led colleges and universities in that city to hold virtual classes at the beginning of the fall 2022 term and threatened to do so again during spring 2023.

These are just some examples of the scope of post-pandemic academic disruptions faced by higher education institutions in the United States. While some disruptions, such as those caused by weather, have always been part of the academic experience, we can expect an increase in disruptions caused by climate change.

The purpose of this report is not to downplay the physical and mental health impacts on students, staff, and faculty during times of crisis, but rather, to encourage administrators of colleges and universities to maintain a plan for academic continuity that can be used in both –short- and long-term situations, so that trauma is not compounded by confusion about academic policies and obligations. Established academic continuity plans allow colleges and universities to use their resources to manage disruptions, rather than using them to develop new plans and policies for each disruption event. Much like required fire drills to prepare a campus community for a fire emergency, higher education needs to maintain a readiness to face disruptions to academic continuity.





REVIEW OF ACADEMIC CONTINUITY PLANS

We reviewed the literature on academic continuity (see the references on page 38) as well as the actual plans of over 100 colleges and universities to discover patterns in structure, policies, and recommendations.¹² Our goal is to provide the field with a set of best practices and resources for developing a general-use academic continuity plan or adapting one established during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis sample included 65 public four-year institutions, 26 private four-year institutions, and 10 public two-year institutions.¹³

RESULTS OF OUR ANALYSIS

METHODOLOGY

Rating system

Referencing the most comprehensive plans in our sample¹⁴, we drew up a list of topics that could serve as a baseline for what plans should include. From that list, we assessed all the plans on how extensively, or if at all, they covered the topic. Ratings for each topic ranged from 0 to 3. A zero score indicates that there is no mention of the topic in the academic continuity plan. A score of one indicates that the topic is mentioned, but there is little provided in terms of instructions or resources. Scores two and three indicate that the topic was mentioned and the plan provided instructions and resources. We decided that a plan earned a score of three if it included the topic being highlighted early on or as critical in the plan, if it was easy to navigate to the resources on the topic, and if the resources were current and thorough.

Table 1.

Rating system for topics in academic continuity plans

Zero - 0	There is no mention of the topic in the academic continuity plan.
One - 1	The topic is mentioned, but there is little about it in terms of instructions or resources.
Two - 2	The topic is mentioned and the plan provides instructions and resources, but they are not easy to find or they are not as thorough as they could be.
Three - 3	The topic is highlighted early on in the plan or as critical in the plan, it is easy to navigate to the resources on the topic, and the resources are current and thorough.

Three reporting metrics:

- **How many plans include the topic**
- **Overall strength/importance of the topic across all plans**
- **Average strength/importance of the topic across all plans**

Our results report three metrics. First, column one in Table 1—the rating system for topics in academic continuity plans—reports the number of institutional academic continuity plans of the 100 we analyzed that included each topic listed below. Column two reports the raw score of the topic across the 100 institutional academic continuity plans. We use this score as a proxy for the strength and/or importance of this topic across institutional plans. The third column reports the average strength of each topic across institutional plans. The scores across all three columns generally align. However, there are instances in which a topic was mentioned in more plans but the information provided on the topic across the plans may not have been as strong as with other topics. This can be seen in rows 1 and 2, where the topic of communication is included in more of the plans, but the topic of online classes was covered more thoroughly in the plans that included it, giving it higher raw and average scores than communication.

Topics of academic continuity plans

Additional resources - The plan provides faculty with a list of resources to share with students, such as an institutional student emergency fund, institutional and/or local food banks, counseling services, and an electronic device loan program.

Adjust calendar - The plan mentions the need to adjust the calendar or assignment due dates to finish the term. The plan outlines scenarios to help faculty satisfy contact-hour minimums in their courses.

Alternative faculty - The plan provides guidance in maintaining faculty oversight of courses when the faculty on record cannot complete the whole term's teaching.

Assessments - The plan encourages faculty to consider alternate ways of testing and assessing student grades outside of in-class exams. The plan provides examples of ways to assess student mastery of course objectives as well as ways to design assessments to minimize violations of academic integrity.

Care/empathy - The plan encourages faculty to show care and empathy for students in crisis.

Communication - The plan encourages faculty to develop a communication plan with their students, and provides resources for developing a communication plan with students.

Course content - The plan informs faculty about what to do with course content, such as uploading it to the LMS (learning management system) or some other place students can access it.

Digital learning tools - Links to digital learning tools and instructions on how to use them are provided in the plan. Digital tools include the LMS, email, texting, online resources, virtual meeting tools, virtual exam tools, adaptive courseware, digital textbooks, and open educational resources (OERs).

Equity - Equity concerns such as access to hardware, software, and broadband are addressed in the plan. There is language and guidance on how a crisis or disruption affects various populations differently, generating the need for an equitable distribution of resources as opposed to an equal distribution of resources.

Flexibility - The plan encourages faculty to be flexible with students in terms of due dates and the format of assignments (audio files vs. print papers, for example).

Hybrid classes - Switching face-to-face courses to a hybrid modality is part of a solution offered by the plan.



Moving classes to other sites - The plan provides guidance for a scenario in which one or more classroom buildings are permanently or temporarily closed, requiring classes to be relocated.

Online classes - Moving courses online and expanding existing online course offerings are part of a solution offered by the plan.

Partnerships with other institutions - Personnel, facilities, or other resource partnerships are part of a solution offered by the plan. This is particularly important when campus facilities are damaged.

Various scenarios - The plan covers various emergency situations such as bad weather, a natural disaster, a pandemic, closure of a campus, faculty unable to teach, students unable to access campus, and whether the disruption is short term or long term.



SAMPLE RESULTS

Table 2. *Sample results*

Row #		Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
	Topics within academic continuity plans	Number of institutions (out of 100 analyzed) that included the topic in their academic continuity plan	Total strength of the topic for the institutions that included it. The highest score possible is 300.	The average strength of topic for the institutions that included it. The highest score possible is 3.0.
1	Communication with students	96	240	2.50
2	Moving classes online	95	244	2.57
3	Delivering course content	93	228	2.45
4	Managing assessments	92	214	2.33
5	Adjusting the term calendar	91	184	2.02
6	Additional student resources	89	218	2.45
7	Various disruption scenarios	89	176	1.98
8	Flexibility with students	88	208	2.36
9	Hybrid class modality	87	167	1.92
10	Digital learning	80	199	2.49
11	Care/empathy for students	79	173	2.19
12	Moving classes to other sites	74	136	1.84

13	Alternative faculty	72	118	1.64
14	Equity	70	144	2.06
15	Partnerships with other institutions	69	96	1.39

Table 2. Key Takeaways

67 of 100 institutions included all 15 topics

- Of these, 54 percent are public, four-year institutions, 34 percent are private, four-year institutions, and 12 percent are public two-year institutions.
- The breakdown of remaining plans that did not address all 15 topics is as follows:
 - 85 percent are public, four-year institutions
 - 9 percent are private, four-year institutions
 - 6 percent are public, two-year institutions

High-priority topics: communication, moving classes online, digital learning, and delivering course content

- The three most common topics were communication with students, moving classes online, and delivering course content.
- The three strongest topics were moving classes online, communication with students, and digital learning.

Low-priority topics: equity, partnerships with other institutions, alternative faculty, and moving classes to other sites

- The three least common topics were alternative faculty, equity, and partnerships with other institutions.
- The three weakest topics were partnerships with other institutions, alternative faculty, and moving classes to other sites. A close fourth was various disruption scenarios.

The high-priority topics indicate a focus on making courses work using digital tools. Built into these topics is the assumption that the school's tech infrastructure is intact and that even if they are not on campus, students will be able to access the school's network.

The low-priority topics indicate a focus on COVID-19 public health protocols, but not on other disruption scenarios that might affect campus facilities and personnel. The low priority of the topic of equity may show how much work needs to be done to support our most vulnerable students.

KEY STRATEGIES

1. Lead with equity, and embed it in every part of academic continuity planning.

Crises affect people in different ways. People with fewer resources are going to need more assistance to get through and recover from a crisis. A common mantra during the lockdown phase of COVID-19 was that “we are all in the same storm, but in different boats.” Lockdown highlighted an existing issue of inequities in higher education not just for students but also for staff and faculty who could not easily pivot to remote work because of issues relating to workspace, childcare, broadband access, and hardware limitations. For students, these issues were compounded by financial and health fears, strains on mental health, and the mental and physical fatigue of virtual learning. Gibbs et al. write in their 2022 article “Universities and multiple disaster scenarios: A transformative framework for disaster resilient universities”:

Disasters do affect different groups in variable ways, but often for no good reason other than ingrained social privilege or lack of resources. The universal and general nature of disasters asks us to question the equity and inclusiveness with which universities operate, and the ways in which they can be considered to have responsibilities to the communities they serve (many of which have traditionally been excluded from campus life). In short, universities must attend to how they are ‘experienced’ by those that share their place.¹⁵

If considerations of equity are not addressed when planning for academic disruption, as during COVID-19, schools will lose students and the morale of their personnel will suffer. Some examples of addressing equity we saw in the plans we analyzed include offering services for basic necessities such as a food pantry, bottled water, a relief fund, and temporary housing for displaced students. Services specific to learning included laptop loans, switching from textbooks to openly licensed/public domain digital content, and purchasing personal hotspot devices for students. Most of the policies promoting equity came down to faculty having compassion for students during the crisis. Specific examples of this included allowing students flexibility regarding assignment due dates, checking in on students regularly, and displaying a willingness to be flexible with attendance policies.



2. Plan for a variety of academic disruption scenarios.

Just in the last year, we've seen U.S. institutions having to temporarily pivot to remote learning owing to weather issues, flooding, wildfires, campus and off-campus violence, loss of heating and cooling systems, labor strikes, bomb threats, burst pipes, and lack of potable water. In other nations, institutions have had to manage disruptions from earthquakes, war, political unrest, and public health prevention measures. No campus is immune to a loss of facilities, loss of utilities, loss of personnel, and threats posed by weather, violence, and viruses.

A thorough academic continuity plan will address how to continue academic operations when there is a temporary, extended, or permanent loss of all, or part of, the physical campus or campus operations, as well as loss of faculty, personnel, and students. One of our findings was that for many colleges and universities, academic continuity planning remains focused on COVID-19. This is a backward-looking approach that won't help institutions prepare for situations that are dissimilar.

3. Assess student needs based on the nature and impact of the crisis or disruption.

Institutions need to plan for ways to learn from students what they need during times of academic disruption. This could involve adding students to the academic continuity task force, the setting up of listening tours by administrators, and the provision of a hotline whereby students can get help. It is especially important for institutions to include low-income, first-generation, international, and racially minoritized students in these efforts, as their experiences and needs will not necessarily be the same as those for students with more resources.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, many institutions provided assistance to students and personnel in the form of cash, food, hardware and software, and access to broadband. Many schools refunded students' fees for services that were not available, including fees for athletic events, fitness centers, and labs. It became apparent several months into the lockdown that students were going to need additional support for their physical and mental health. Other basic needs that institutions might need to plan for include



housing, transportation, and potable water. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (2020) and the American Rescue Plan (2021) provided institutions of higher education with billions of dollars to fund academic continuity. But as that funding comes to an end, it is important for institutions to plan how they will fund relief efforts in their academic continuity plans.

Students may also have needed more specific adjustments to academic operations, such as flexibility in how and when formative and summative assessments are completed, flexibility with in-class and online attendance, free access to course materials, assistance in temporarily relocating to another school, instructions on how to be an effective online learner, a temporary lifting of requirements for entrance exams and for paying bursar fees before being allowed to register for classes, and the suspending of fees for activities and services unavailable during the crisis. Faculty also need to be mindful of students with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accommodations who will still need that support if the modality of the course changes.

4. Include the basics of teaching using the most used digital technologies at your institution.

One of the lessons we learned during the COVID-19 lockdown was that students struggled with access to course materials that were abandoned in dorms as students were told not to return to campus after spring break. E-book versions of their physical textbooks often required students to purchase the text again. To make matters even worse, many of these e-books could only be read online—a challenge for students with limited access to Wi-Fi and/or broadband internet. Encouraging faculty to replace textbooks with downloadable open educational resources (OERs), open-access content, or e-books owned by the institution's library is an easy way to fix access issues. There are multiple other benefits of using OERs and open-access content, but in times of academic disruption, they make it easier for students to stay on track, as they can access course content both online and offline.

Another issue students struggled with during remote learning was the lack of consistency in course design. With stress levels high and motivation lagging, the mental fatigue of having to navigate multiple learning management systems and/or multiple course designs within the same system was an added achievement obstacle for students. One way to manage this problem is for institutions to build and maintain a copyable course template in the LMS and encourage faculty to use it. Even face-to-face classes benefit from a design that is consistent, pedagogically sound, and aligns with ADA requirements. Having a course template that faculty can customize also makes it easier for faculty members to shift to online or hybrid modalities.

Related to student issues with course design were faculty issues with the multitude of digital learning tools adopted by their institutions and departments to maintain academic continuity. The learning curve was high for faculty using virtual meeting software, video recording software, and collaboration tools. Faculty worked all hours to make sure their course content was available to students in virtual learning spaces. Faculty who taught during the COVID-19 lockdown now have some skills in using digital learning to pivot to

a remote modality, but new faculty will need to be trained on these systems. At the most basic level, institutions should provide on-demand training and instructions for faculty designing remote learning experiences. Additional training might include professional development workshops for new digital learning tools and hands-on refresher courses for existing digital tools.

Finally, we learned from public health protocols for COVID-19 that certain disciplines require special consideration when campus facilities are in limited use. The natural sciences had to figure out how to teach labs; the fine arts had to decide how to supervise practice sessions, rehearsals, and studio time; and the social sciences and schools of education had to figure out how to get students the fieldwork experiences required for their programs. As part of their assessment and strategic planning, departments should develop their own academic continuity plans that align with the institutional academic continuity plan and address specific pedagogical issues in the discipline.

5. Maintain institutional readiness for academic disruption.

An academic continuity plan can only work if key stakeholders are aware it exists, can easily access it, and are trained to carry it out. Hence, we recommend the following:

- Maintain a standing academic continuity committee to update the plan and coordinate with internal and external units involved in the plan.
- Maintain a technology infrastructure and digital learning platforms that can sustain a virtual workload.¹⁶ This step may require an audit of the digital learning tools and other technologies being used to carry out the academic mission of the institution. See the institutional digital tools audit worksheet below on page 26.
- Integrate digital learning into all modes of teaching so that if students and faculty need to quickly pivot to an online or hybrid modality, the learning curve for digital tools is not an obstacle to achieving learning course objectives.
- Make the academic continuity plan easily accessible to both faculty and students.
- Have yearly faculty training and refresher workshops for academic continuity, particularly around policy changes, the availability and use of institutional academic systems and tools, and the various institutional and community resources available to students, faculty, and staff during a crisis.



As Jeff Hescok, Executive Director of Environmental Health & Safety and Emergency Management and Co-director of the Public Health Promotion Center at UMass Amherst, said in an interview for this guidebook, “If you don’t practice, you’re not prepared for game day. It doesn’t matter how big or small you are, things are going to happen. The more prepared you are, the more resilient you are.”



RESOURCES

The following resources aid institutions in formulating and implementing their academic continuity plans.

- [Academic disruption assessment tool](#)
- [Academic continuity plan template](#)
- [Institutional digital tools audit worksheet](#)
- [Links and summaries to exemplar academic continuity plans](#)

ACADEMIC DISRUPTION ASSESSMENT TOOL

We designed the tool below to help academic continuity teams assess the impact of the disruption in order to assign the appropriate resources to the situation.

Table 3.

Academic disruption assessment tool

Levels	Level Description	1	2	3	4	5
Nature of impact	(1) facilities, (2) personnel, (3) public health, (4) mental health, (5) all categories					
Magnitude of impact	(1) negligible, (2) limited, (3) moderate, (4) severe, (5) catastrophic					
Duration of impact	(1) one day, (2) several days, (3) a week or more, (4) a full academic term or more, (5) indefinitely					
Scope of impact	(1) institutional, (2) local, (3) state-wide or regional, (4) national, (5) global					

Tool examples

Table 4.

COVID-19 pandemic application of the academic disruption assessment tool

Levels	Level Description	1	2	3	4	5
Nature of impact	(1) facilities, (2) personnel, (3) public health, (4) mental health, (5) all categories					X
Magnitude of impact	(1) negligible, (2) limited, (3) moderate, (4) severe, (5) catastrophic				X	
Duration of impact	(1) one day, (2) several days, (3) a week or more, (4) a full academic term or more, (5) indefinitely				X	

Levels	Level Description	1	2	3	4	5
Scope of impact	(1) institutional, (2) local, (3) state-wide or regional, (4) national, (5) global					X

Example explanation determining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic using the academic disruption assessment tool: We assessed the COVID-19 pandemic’s nature across all categories as facilities required adjustment or attention to make them safe for personnel and students. In addition, the pandemic led to a loss (temporary and permanent) of personnel, and proved a threat to both public health and the mental health of a significant part of the population. We assessed the COVID-19 pandemic’s magnitude as severe but not catastrophic, in that many aspects of life were limited, but services continued. We could not have known in its early stages that the pandemic would impact us for several full academic terms. However, with the introduction of the vaccine and successful mitigation strategies, we knew within several months the threat was not going to last indefinitely. The scope of the pandemic was global, so we assigned it a score of 5.

Table 5.

Burst pipes in Hume Hall in week one of classes at the University of Mississippi spring 2023 application of the academic disruption assessment tool

Levels	Level Description	1	2	3	4	5
Nature of impact	(1) facilities, (2) personnel, (3) public health, (4) mental health, (5) all categories	X				
Magnitude of impact	(1) negligible, (2) limited, (3) moderate, (4) severe, (5) catastrophic		X			
Duration of impact	(1) one day, (2) several days, (3) a week or more, (4) a full academic term or more, (5) indefinitely		X			
Scope of impact	(1) institutional, (2) local, (3) state-wide or regional, (4) national, (5) global	X				

Example explanation determining the impact of burst pipes at the University of Mississippi using the Academic disruption assessment tool: This disruption mainly affected facilities, but an argument could be made for it posing a public health threat to those who teach, learn, and work in the affected buildings. The magnitude of the flooding affected one building on campus. Previous experience with this type of disruption allows us to assess the duration at several days or more. Finally, the scope of the impact was limited to the institution.

ACADEMIC CONTINUITY PLAN TEMPLATE

Topic	Description	Links/contact information	Institutional policies
Additional resources for students	The plan provides faculty with a list of resources to share with students, such as an institutional student emergency fund, institutional and/or local food banks, counseling services, and an electronic device loan program.		
Adjustment of the term calendar	The plan mentions the need to adjust the calendar or assignment due dates to finish the term. The plan outlines scenarios to help faculty satisfy contact-hour minimums in their courses.		
Alternative faculty	The plan provides guidance in maintaining faculty oversight of courses when the faculty on record cannot complete the academic term.		
Assessments	The plan encourages faculty to consider alternate ways of testing and assessing student grades outside of in-class exams. The plan provides examples of ways to assess student mastery of course objectives as well as ways to design assessments to minimize violations of academic integrity.		

Care/ empathy for students	Faculty are encouraged to show care and empathy for students in crisis.		
Communi- cation with students	The plan encourages faculty to develop a communication plan with their students. The plan provides resources for developing a communication plan with students.		
Delivering course content	The plan tells faculty what to do with course content such as uploading it to the LMS (learning management system) or some other place students can access it.		
Digital learning tools	Links to digital learning tools and instructions on how to use them are provided in the plan. Digital tools include the LMS, email, texting, online resources, virtual meeting tools, virtual exam tools, adaptive courseware, digital textbooks, and open educational resources (OERs).		
Equity	Equity concerns such as access to		

	<p>hardware, software, and broadband are addressed in the plan. There is language and guidance on how a crisis or disruption affects various populations differently, generating the need for an equitable distribution of resources as opposed to an equal distribution of resources.</p>		
Flexibility	<p>Faculty are encouraged to be flexible with students in terms of due dates and the format of assignments (audio files vs. print papers, for example).</p>		
Hybrid classes	<p>Switching face-to-face courses to a hybrid modality is part of a solution offered by the plan.</p>		
Moving classes to other sites	<p>The plan provides guidance for a scenario in which one or more classroom buildings are permanently or temporarily closed, requiring classes to be relocated.</p>		
Online classes	<p>Moving courses online and expanding existing online course offerings are part of a solution offered by the plan.</p>		

<p>Partnerships with other institutions</p>	<p>Personnel, facilities, or other resource partnerships are part of a solution offered by the plan. This is particularly important when campus facilities are damaged.</p>		
<p>Various scenarios</p>	<p>The plan covers various emergency situations such as bad weather, a natural disaster, a pandemic, closure of a campus, faculty unable to teach, students unable to access campus, and whether the disruption is short term or long term, etc.</p>		



INSTITUTIONAL DIGITAL TOOLS AUDIT WORKSHEET

Table 7.

Institutional digital tools audit worksheet

<p>Institutional contract systems</p>	<p>These are contracted and paid at the institutional level and are generally available to all faculty and students. Examples include the school LMS, virtual meeting software, cloud storage, and apps included with office systems such as Google and Outlook.</p>	
<p>School-level contract systems</p>	<p>These are contracted and paid for by schools for purposes specific to their disciplines, such as test prep and testing software, open-access course materials, inclusive access to textbooks, and discipline-specific tools.</p>	
<p>Departmental contract systems</p>	<p>Some of these might overlap with school-level systems but also include e-books, courseware, and other course tools built into course fees or tuition.</p>	
<p>Course-level systems</p>	<p>Some of these might overlap with school-level systems, but the students, rather than the department, tend to pay directly for subscription access.</p>	
<p>Free tools individual faculty and students might use</p>	<p>These include a range of communication apps, quizzing and polling apps, project management apps, and social media apps.</p>	

LINKS AND SUMMARIES TO EXEMPLAR ACADEMIC CONTINUITY PLANS

[UMass Amherst Guide and UMass Amherst Planning Tool](#)

These were the most comprehensive resources we found online, covering a variety of disruption scenarios and centering around care and equity for students. The guide and planning tool offers academic leaders guiding questions for planning, and for those at the UMass campus, screenshots to help them navigate the online planning tool.

[Minnesota State Tech](#)

This five-step plan is fully online and easy for users to navigate. It thoroughly covers considerations and processes in academic planning with the exception of considerations of equity. It also includes a faculty checklist to gauge their level of preparedness before transitioning to remote learning and a worksheet to guide planning.

[Elon University](#)

This fully online plan has six sections full of useful content and links for how faculty can use digital learning to continue teaching during times of disruption. We especially like how the entire plan is framed under the title “Supporting student learning during times of disruption” and includes the section “Maintaining a Supportive Classroom Community.” Care for students’ physical and mental well-being is woven into each section of the plan.





CONCLUSION

Digital learning tools and platforms provide a solution for moving learning environments online in times of academic disruption. But they also play a bigger role in academic continuity planning. Plans housed on institutional websites and in the institution's learning management system (LMS) are easily accessible to stakeholders at the institution, including faculty and students. Training modules used to carry out academic continuity plans can also be housed on the website and the LMS. Digital learning is not an all-inclusive solution to academic disruption, but it is essential to two top institutional concerns: (1) communication with students, and (2) delivery of course content and assessments. Additionally, equity did not rank high in our analysis of existing plans, but it is a moral imperative for institutions to include it in their academic continuity planning. Digital learning—when integrated and executed intentionally to improve access, lower costs, and provide students with a learning experience that is personalized to their needs—can address many of the inequities that serve as roadblocks to student progress and success.

APPENDICES: INSTITUTIONAL PROFILES

These profiles are adapted from blog posts written by Robert McGuire of [McGuire Editorial & Consulting](#).

Appendix A: Interview with Tom Cavanagh, Vice Provost for Digital Learning at the University of Central Florida

This blog was originally published on April 10, 2023, [The Role of Digital Learning in Academic Disruption: Lessons from UCF's Experience with Hurricanes](#)

Being in a region prone to hurricanes, the University of Central Florida is used to dealing with academic disruption and has well-documented emergency plans. If there's any advantage to hurricanes, it's that they typically give plenty of advance notice that UCF needs to set up its experienced 24/7 Emergency Operations Center.

"It's like being stalked by a turtle," says Thomas Cavanagh, Vice Provost for Digital Learning at UCF. "You watch it for a week and a half as it gets closer and scarier, so you can prepare."

Hurricane Ian in September 2022 was one such slow-moving disaster that disrupted academic operations at UCF. It caused catastrophic wind and flooding damage in surrounding communities, and it was one of the deadliest on record, [killing over 150 people in the state](#).

The UCF campus itself had almost no damage from the storm, so, in theory, as soon as the power and internet service were restored, classrooms and other facilities were available to function as normal. And, since online courses are stored in a data center far from Florida, UCF could also, in theory, immediately resume instruction.

Even so, classes at UCF were suspended for a week, which illustrates how off-campus disasters can cause on-campus—and online—disruption.

The primary reason is that employees and students were scattered far from campus and dealing with various degrees of displacement and ongoing emergencies. Many employees lost their homes, and private off-campus apartment buildings flooded, displacing 600 students.

Another issue is that many students had returned to their family homes in other parts of the state that were more severely impacted. "At the time, we didn't know how many students [from the Gulf Coast] were down there to be with their parents," Cavanagh says.

The takeaway from that experience for other campuses, says Cavanagh, is that when it comes to academic disruption, the campus and the institution aren't synonymous. The former can be mostly fine, while the latter can be severely disrupted.

"If you have people with connections back to the main campus being impacted," he says, "it's more consistent to say, 'We're shut down. People need to take care of health and safety and we'll deal with all the rest of it when it's safe.' Our general rule is, if the university is closed, it's closed online. It would be wildly inconsistent between everybody who uses the systems because some are without power or they don't have internet."

The role of digital learning in recovery

When online classes at UCF are suspended during emergency periods, the resources of the Division of Digital Learning do play one important role.

“The LMS is like the campus watering hole,” Cavanagh says. “At some point, all the residents come there, so it’s a great place to put key messages. We amplify official university messaging, either through the mobile app or the LMS, to make sure everybody is seeing what they’re supposed to be seeing. In an emergency, [digital learning tools] become useful for communication.”

The recovery phase after the emergency is where UCF leans on remote learning, he says. Once everyone is safe and available to return to teaching and learning, online might be the best means for doing that.

For example, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, UCF, like many institutions, shifted on short notice to mostly online learning. As part of the ongoing institutional emergency preparedness, the Division of Digital Learning is working to document lessons learned and processes developed during the COVID-19 disruption so a large-scale shift to online learning can be part of the recovery phase in the future.

Even when digital learning isn’t used for entire courses, it is helpful in the recovery phase in other ways. For example, legislation or accreditation requirements might require a specific number of hours of instruction that are difficult to make up in physical classrooms. The digital learning infrastructure can be extended in creative ways so face-to-face classes can use it to recoup lessons lost. UCF relied on that capacity after Hurricane Irma in September 2017, which suspended classes for 21 days.

Academic disruption at the individual level

As Cavanagh pointed out above, students and employees can be impacted by a disaster that misses the campus. An emerging phenomenon is that, in the age of large-scale remote online learning, individual students can be dealing with crises very remote from campus.

The UCF Division of Digital Learning has students around the globe and that means “we have to monitor things that happen elsewhere that don’t impact us locally,” Cavanagh says. “We’ve had students impacted by wildfires in other states or hurricanes in Puerto Rico. We had a student who was in Kyiv getting bombed in the middle of the war. We reach out to their faculty and ask them for extensions or whatever. You name it, we try to keep on top of it.”

Innovation and collaboration: UCF’s mass due-date revision tool

After Hurricane Irma in 2017, when every class at UCF was behind schedule by three weeks, the university developed an integration tool for the Canvas LMS they called Due Date Changer. It was designed to help all faculty speedily return to normal operations by letting them quickly revise the dates in a course. (It is also convenient when just moving an existing course to a new term.) In 2018, when Hurricane Michael impacted many other institutions in the southeast, UCF made the tool publicly available to other Canvas users.

Put another way, if an institution has a large enough online learning program, somebody somewhere is likely experiencing an emergency that disrupts their teaching or learning. Colleges and universities will increasingly need to plan for supporting those employees and students effectively.

Disruption and the digital divide

Whether a disruption is something the whole campus is experiencing or unique to a single student, Cavanagh says the Division of Digital Learning is often the first point of contact. That means they can play a role in getting the student other essential resources.

During the early days of the COVID-19 disruption, for example, like most institutions, UCF had a significant number of students trying to learn online without laptops and reliable telecom services.

“Students would present to us first because they had a technical problem, but that wasn’t their only problem,” Cavanagh says. As a result, his team in the Division of Digital Learning is a primary referrer to academic, mental health, and other student support services.

“A student who has digital divide issues, oftentimes that’s not the only issue they have,” Cavanagh says. “They might have food insecurity or housing insecurity. Their financial aid is running out. Students would present to us first because they had a technical problem, but that wasn’t their only problem.”

As a result, he says his team in the Division of Digital Learning is a primary referrer to academic, mental health, and other student support services. They work closely with an umbrella program called UCF Cares. It’s important for the digital learning office to be sensitive to the issues students are dealing with apart from information technology, and to be educated about the resources on campus so they can make effective referrals.

Expect the unexpected

Cavanagh says the COVID-19 emergency accelerated learning about preparing for academic continuity during disruption. It highlighted the nuances of how students experience the digital divide; it showed the importance of designing online teaching and learning for mobile devices; it showed how every individual student has unique experiences that need to be considered; and it prompted the development of new resources like Keep Teaching pages.

“There are going to be things that surprise you,” he says. “If it was just hurricanes, I think we understand how to prepare for them because we have a lot of practice with that. But having COVID come through, we had to repurpose those plans in ways and on a timeline we had just never dealt with before.”

The way he thinks of academic continuity now, he says, is like a Venn diagram with two circles. One circle plans for the disruption the institution can anticipate—hurricanes in the case of UCF. The other plans for what it can’t anticipate, like shifting 70,000 students to online learning on a week’s notice. There will be some overlap in the two circles, but the institution doesn’t benefit from that overlap if it doesn’t envision disruption, plan for it, and document it.

Appendix B: An interview with California State University at Santa Cruz’s Jody Greene, Special Advisor to the Provost for Educational Equity and Academic Success, and Michael Tassio, Director for Digital Learning and Engagement

This blog was originally published May 15, 2023, [When Emergencies Become Normal: How UC Santa Cruz Sustains Academic Continuity Through Frequent Disruption](#)

University of California, Santa Cruz, has a lot of practice maintaining academic continuity through disruption. When Every Learner Everywhere reached out to online learning leaders there to ask about the impact of the [“atmospheric river” of January 2023](#) and the devastating floods that resulted, they pointed out that it was only the most recent disruption going back at least 13 consecutive quarters.

“It was strike, COVID, fire, strike, floods, and power outages,” says Jody Greene, Special Advisor to the Provost for Educational Equity and Academic Success, counting off the events that have brought continuity plans into action. “We were trying to do remote instruction during COVID when . . . no, power outages came first. Then this past summer, we had a heat event. We’ve basically had everything.”

They say they can think of another possible disruption, but they hesitate to say it aloud. One doubts whether it was the [unprecedented snowfall that cut highway access around the campus](#) a couple of weeks after our conversation.

Most of the disruptions Greene referenced are extreme weather events—drought, wildfires, landslides, and flooding. Those, they say, “are not discrete. They’re actually the same climate change event just unfolding in slow time.”

Other disruptions impacting the institution recently have been unionized labor actions—a [wildcat strike by UC Santa Cruz graduate students in February 2020](#) and [a six-week system-wide strike in fall of 2022](#). In both cases, some faculty relied on remote teaching and learning resources to keep their courses running.

The 2020 strike in particular turned out to be an important experience to draw on: a month after it was resolved, all in-person classes were suspended in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Growing capacity for continuity

As at other institutions, disruptions to the people who work and study at UC Santa Cruz can differ from the impact on the campus itself. On one hand, the January 2023 flooding never closed the campus, but flexibility needed to be extended to faculty, staff, and students who were unable to get there. Students and employees commuting from the nearby Santa Cruz Mountains, in particular, can be impacted by extreme weather that spares the campus.

On the other hand, a [wildfire in August 2020](#) not only closed the campus but also forced an evacuation. In any case, the institution has developed the experience and the infrastructure to rely on online teaching and learning so classes are not suspended entirely.

Michael Tassio, Director for Digital Learning and Engagement, says, “We make a careful distinction between emergency remote instruction and online learning. Our online courses have a great deal of attention put into the design. In an emergency, we put our care and attention into designing courses to have more flexibility, because some students don’t have power, they are unable to connect to the internet, or they can’t access campus. There are a variety of reasons more flexibility is needed in response to emergencies.”

One effect of so many shifts to emergency remote instruction is that faculty depend on his office less and less with each event. During the recent flooding, Tassio says, “It was clear people had learned during the pandemic. People didn’t have to refresh their memory of how to put a class into an alternate modality.”

Greene adds that videoconference tools like Zoom are a common resource, “But that is never the only thing we recommend to people, because teaching hybrid is really hard. We have a whole library of alternative ways to offer your class to people who cannot get there in person.”

Those include video capture tools, for example. And the institution regularly maintains its [Keep Teaching](#) page for faculty needing it during emergency remote instruction.

Faculty development for continuity

Successfully handling emergency remote instruction depends on the fact that there are no absolute lines between faculty development in general and online learning in particular.

“Honestly, it doesn’t matter if it’s an online or an in-person course,” Tassio says. “When we start talking about course design, everything changes, because we use the high-impact research-based practices we know work. Largely, our work is in the design space. It’s not about the modality.”

For example, he often urges faculty to reconsider how they use high-stakes assessments, and “COVID gave us an opportunity to redesign courses to use models that focus more on low-stakes assessments that build on each other throughout the quarter.”

Sharing resources

“Faculty development has always been an open-source activity,” Jody Greene says.

“In the pandemic, because we all had one week, there was this collectivizing activity and radical sharing [between institutions] that has continued afterward. Faculty development professionals became absolutely dependent on each other because we were all needing to develop the same things at the same time.”

Greene and Tassio particularly recommend the following resources on academic continuity:

- [Dealing With the Unexpected: Teaching When You or Your Students Can’t Make It to Class](#) from the Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching
- [The Student Resources section of the Keep Teaching](#) page at UC Davis
- The [Events section of the Keep Teaching](#) page at UC Santa Cruz, which outlines resources for specific kinds of disruptions

Another area he counsels faculty to consider is how individual work can affect engagement: “COVID showed faculty that student work in breakout rooms works really well, so that became an opportunity to engage students who don’t do as well on individualistic work but who have strengths in collaborating. That gave us a route to using digital tools to elevate those skills and give students an opportunity they may not have had otherwise.”

Student engagement informs how UC Santa Cruz selects digital learning tools, whether for face-to-face or distance learning modalities. “When we think about tools we bring to campus, we’re really thinking about how students work with one another,” Tassio says. “How can collaboration be built in? We’re less excited about the textbook they work on by themselves in their online course.”

The blurred distinction between faculty development for in-person and online formats is informing a reorganization at UC Santa Cruz. During most of the disruptions described earlier, Tassio and Greene were responsible for [Online Education](#) and [The Center for Innovations in Teaching and Learning](#), respectively. During the spring of 2023, the institution has been in the process of merging those two units into an integrated teaching and learning center.

“As Michael says, all instruction will be technologically enhanced going forward,” Greene explains. “It doesn’t make sense to have a teaching center that doesn’t have instructional technology expertise and a separate shop where the instructional technology lives.” You need an integrated model of a teaching center, they say, “where every course can be designed and every course can have instructional technology designed into it as its learning goals merit.”

Equity-focused continuity

Likewise, there are no bright lines between faculty development and equity efforts.

“We need to think about equity and accessibility as design issues and not as after-the-fact response strategies,” Greene says. “All students will have an access challenge at some point in the quarter. We’re not just talking about poor or disabled students. It’s a family difficulty, a work schedule change. We start from the presumption that everything is not going to go swimmingly for everyone at all times, and that helps us use design to give alternatives to accommodate those who have access challenges for any reason.”

They add that equity-driven changes in the classroom were happening slowly before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, “so on some level, COVID did us a big favor by centering these issues. Instructors were required to engage in help-seeking behavior because they couldn’t keep teaching without help. It really accelerated a trend and beneficially.”

Planning ahead for continuity

Asked what peer institutions can learn from the experience UC Santa Cruz has with disruption and academic continuity, Greene and Tassio emphasize understanding the impacts across the institution and including more people in decision-making.

For example, many courses at UC Santa Cruz depend on graduate student support, so a shift to online learning often involves multiple instructors, many of whom may have their own access issues.

Likewise, faculty are also being disrupted by emergencies, “and my observation is that in most places, they’re not really taken into account as though they themselves are people having radical life experiences,” Greene says.

“When we emptied out faculty housing in the summer of 2020, it raised attention for people that these folks are having an experience, too,” Greene continues. “Make sure that you include your staff and faculty in your compassion-based planning. Compassion often ends with the students, and that’s not going to serve sustainability going forward.”

Secondly, they advise peer institutions to ensure the center for teaching and learning is included in emergency planning: “I talk to other teaching center directors who were not in any of the meetings about the pandemic impacts and whether the semester would be starting online or not. It astonished me that these decisions were being made without the people who would actually have to execute them. If they’re not in the room, you’re going to have breaks in the chain back to faculty.”

Lastly, they emphasize faculty autonomy. “We take their skill seriously, even as we recognize that there hasn’t been much professionalization for teaching,” they say. “We would never say to everyone, ‘We’re going to Zoom on Monday.’ We say to them, ‘Here are a range of ways. Use the one that fits best with the learning goals of your course and that fits best with your situation.’”

Infrastructure for continuity

Prior to the pandemic, the Center for Innovations in Teaching and Learning at UC Santa Cruz had three staff members, and Online Education had two. Partly because of the needs created by so much academic disruption, the office emerging from the reorganization has grown to more than 15 staff, “because we convinced the campus that a small investment in our support systems would mean that people had a massively different experience,” Greene says.

As a result, Tassio says, the campus culture has evolved to seek and expect support for digital learning, and his team has the infrastructure in place to provide it. Inquiries are less about reacting to an emergency and more about effective course design. Consultations happen almost constantly via Google Chat and Slack channels, and as knowledge is built, it is documented and developed into reference materials.

One innovation has been to share the address of a Zoom room that is kept open during business hours for drop-in questions. “Literally, we are right there when you need help,” he says.

After 13 quarters in a row of academic disruption, UC Santa Cruz can’t afford to assume the next quarter will be “normal” and that the Keep Teaching page can be mothballed. Don’t they have to anticipate the unanticipated and assume the next term will bring a new surprise that will push the institution to emergency remote learning again?

“If there is, our response will be, ‘We’ve got this,’” Tassio says. “We know what to do at this point.”

Appendix C: An interview with Jeff Hescoock, Executive Director of Environmental Health and Safety and Emergency Management and Co-director of the Public Health Promotion Center at UMass Amherst

This blog was originally published June 5, 2023, [How Individual Departments Inform Emergency and Continuity Planning At UMass Amherst](#)

When the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic began to impact the University of Massachusetts Amherst campus in March 2020, the institution was able to draw on a comprehensive continuity planning tool that had been in place since 2014.

[UMass Ready](#) is a framework for academic continuity that includes an instrument that individual departments use to identify their particular needs in case of a disruption. Previously, the plan primarily outlined responses to severe weather events that would close the campus, like blizzards, as well as more “everyday” disruptions—an instructor or other key personnel is away unexpectedly or a building is unavailable because of a power outage.

Essentially, [the instrument](#) asks departments to imagine that key facilities, people, systems, or resources aren’t available, whatever the cause. What would need to be done to bridge the gap? What alternate facilities would the department require? Who has the authority to delegate responsibilities or sign approvals? Are there sensitive machines that need to be checked? What students or faculty are working abroad or otherwise off campus? What communications have to go out, and who has the necessary access?

Individual academic departments, as well as units in student affairs, operations, and other services, used the instrument to inform appendices to the comprehensive institutional plan comprising UMass Ready. “The tool is helping folks forward-think some of the things they have to do,” says Jeff Hescoock, Executive Director of Environmental Health and Safety and Emergency Management and Co-director of the Public Health Promotion Center at UMass Amherst.

“They’re typing out certain things, but we are the ones actually helping them create their plan. It’s not just ‘Insert department name here.’ I don’t know what I don’t know. You’re the expert at how you’re teaching your course. The difference between an engineering class and a music class is going to be night and day in terms of the resources they need.”

Another day, another disruption

The question of continuity addressed by UMass Ready can be more mundane than the word “emergency” suggests. For example, on the day Hescoock gave this interview, he was dealing with a power outage in one of the four campus dining halls and a flood in an academic building.

“Quite frankly, in some respects, it doesn’t matter what the cause is,” Hescoock says. “It’s not the effect. We take an all-hazards approach with our plans.”

The effect on this day was that a dining hall couldn’t open for breakfast and a lecture hall was unavailable for a scheduled class. The solution for the first challenge was to extend hours in the other dining halls. Not feeding a quarter of the students for a day wasn’t an option.

The latter challenge did offer options: cancel class, find an alternative space for that day's class meeting, or—something that was far less common before March 2020—shift on short notice to remote learning.

Pandemic response

Even though a pandemic was one of the imagined scenarios in the continuity planning instrument, Hescocock says, “I’d be stretching it to say that was the number-one thing people looked at.” Users gravitated toward problems that might last a few days—the internet is out, the electricity is out, or a blizzard closes the roads.

Still, the process of developing UMass Ready for individual departments in the years prior to the pandemic gave the institution a head start in responding to it, as did a meningitis outbreak on campus in 2017. Departments already had experience thinking through questions about how long a given activity could be delayed and what personnel were needed.

With the planning framework created by the Emergency Management and Safety office in place, the process of shifting to online learning was led by the Provost’s Office, Hescocock says. “That was a huge undertaking to pivot to online learning within a couple of weeks, and they did a remarkable job.”

UMass Ready continued to guide academic and operational planning for the fall of 2020, with its mix of social distancing and greatly expanded remote learning. For example, the decision was made that Chemistry 101 lab courses needed to run in person, but lab spaces had to be limited to fewer students. Fewer people in the same spaces meant more sections had to be on the schedule, which created a new hiring challenge.

“The biggest questions go back to staffing,” Hescocock says. “What is the true minimum number of people you need to continue something? We had looked at it more from a people perspective than an IT perspective. In order to run, you need 20 people, but what if we don’t have 20 people right now? [The advance planning] led us down that path, which was very helpful.”

Moving into the fall of 2020, IT infrastructure did become a bigger part of resource planning for online courses, says Hescocock. “When we walked through the checklist at that point, we didn’t worry about where your alternate facility is. We need to understand what additional capabilities you’re depending on. If everybody was checking the box that they need a certain system, that allowed us to say we need to go to the gold version to allow that many users.”

Complexity and continuity

The instrument used for the departmental-level appendices to UMass Ready can be thought of as a discovery tool that reveals the extraordinary variety of activity on a campus of more than 30,000 students. At a research university like UMass Amherst, there is something unique behind almost every door, because part of the mission is “pushing the envelope and going beyond,” says Hescocock.

For example, one building at UMass Amherst—the Institute for Applied Life Sciences—is filled with startup businesses that are commercializing bench research, each with its own facilities and requirements. Other biological science facilities can have everything from fruit flies to livestock that needs tending.

Historic materials in art and library collections may need specific, regular care. Supercomputers in other labs may be running processes that shouldn't be interrupted. Students and faculty in the social sciences may be conducting fieldwork off campus that is time sensitive.

"The more the departments tell us, the better we can help prepare," Hescoock says. "I never knew you had that piece of equipment. You know what? You should have an [uninterruptible power supply] on that.' That conversation can save somebody's research. If that's all that comes out of it, that's a success."

Knowing what is essential

Hescoock says that at UMass Amherst, like most institutions, everyone is now better prepared to teach online when it's not safe or feasible to get to campus. It's the "no more snow days" effect. Similarly, a flooded lecture hall doesn't have to mean a disruption in teaching and learning.

More comprehensively, everyone is better prepared for emergencies of any kind. "The pandemic was the biggest continuity event you could have because it pushed the envelope in terms of technology and making sure it could work," Hescoock says. "It emphasized what is essential that we need to continue."

An emergency is partly a problem of gathering and sorting information in a compressed time frame when communication is uncertain. Not every question can be answered in advance, but preparedness planning—and the experience of the pandemic—increased the amount of information that is already at hand and ready to use. That institutional knowledge gives the college or university a head start on responding to the next emergency.

"Our mission is to support our students, our faculty and staff, and the research," says Hescoock. "If you don't practice, you're not prepared for game day. It doesn't matter how big or small you are, things are going to happen. The more prepared you are, the more resilient you are."

References and further reading

- Citrix Systems. (2020). Higher education: Ensuring continuity during a disruption. Citrix Systems. Retrieved from www.citrix.com/content/dam/citrix/en_us/documents/white-paper/higher-education-ensuring-continuity-during-distruption.pdf
- Disaster Resilient Universities (DRU) Network at the University of Oregon <https://safety.uoregon.edu/disaster-resilient-universities-network>
- García-Morales, V. J., Garrido-Moreno, A., & Martín-Rojas, R. (2021). The transformation of higher education after the covid disruption: Emerging challenges in an online learning scenario. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. doi: [10.3389/fpsyg.2021.616059](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.616059)
- Gibbs, L., bin Jehangir, H., Jit Leung Kwong, E., & Little, A. (2022). Universities and multiple disaster scenarios: A transformative framework for disaster resilient universities. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 78, 103132 doi: [10.1016/j.ijdr.2022.103132](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2022.103132)
- Great Value Colleges. (2022). 30 US Colleges that are prepared for natural disasters: These colleges are well equipped to overcome a range of environmental emergencies. Retrieved from www.greatvaluecolleges.net/disaster-preparedness-plans/
- Green R. (2014). Resilient campuses: Leveraging resources among small- and moderate-sized institutions of higher education. *Journal of Emergency Management*, 12(1), 21–30. doi: 10.5055/jem.2014.0159. PMID: 24691913
- Kapucu, N. (2010). *Survey results of disaster-resilient universities*. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from www.academia.edu/10416267/Disaster_Resilient_Universities
- Kapucu, N., & Khosa, S. (2013). Disaster resiliency and culture of preparedness for university and college campuses. *Administration & Society*, 45(1), 3–37. doi: [10.1177/0095399712471626](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399712471626)
- Liu, R. (2021). Disparities in disruptions to postsecondary education plans during the COVID-19 pandemic(2021) *AERA Open*, 7(1), 1–19. doi: [10.1177/23328584211045400](https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211045400)
- Lokken, F. (2022). Disruption and the future of higher education. Community College Daily. Retrieved from www.ccdaily.com/2022/01/disruption-and-the-future-of-higher-education/
- McMillen, L., Riga, P., House, M., & Johnson, R. (2021). *Strategic planning in the age of disruption [Webinar]*. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from https://chronicle.zoom.us/rec/play/aromDS2BjSxO7bK7dmaE1aVyUbdcSDtWwPpyIoUNHysAIXyMFqYFr0sj91e_jXnR9ucsclt_65hLznZi.zDDqKPY-07-CrU2j?continueMode=true
- Parker, S. (2020). *The future of higher education in a disruptive world*. KPMG International. Retrieved from <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/xx/pdf/2020/10/future-of-higher-education.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (2003). *Building a disaster-resistant university*. Retrieved from <https://mitigation.eeri.org/files/FMEA443.disaster.resist.univ.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (2022). *Ready campus*. Retrieved from www.ready.gov/campus

Endnotes

¹ Parker, S. (2020). *The future of higher education in a disruptive world*. KPMG International. Pg. 20. Retrieved from <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/xx/pdf/2020/10/future-of-higher-education.pdf>

² www.bmcc.cuny.edu/about-bmcc/9-11-and-bmcc/

³ <https://75th.business.uconn.edu/2015/08/28/tulane-president-stood-up-to-hurricane-katrina-and-won/>

⁴ www.henrystewartpublications.com/sites/default/files/JBCEP111_Academiccontinuityplanninginhighereducation.pdf, pg. 76

⁵ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ837474.pdf>

⁶ <http://home.sreb.org/publication/news1.aspx?Code=1108>

⁷ <https://olj.onlinelearningconsortium.org/index.php/olj/article/view/1693/526>

⁸ Girard, J. P., Yerby, J., & Floyd, K. (2016). Knowledge retention in capstone experiences: An analysis of online and face-to-face courses. *Knowledge, Management & E-Learning*, 8(4), 528–539. doi: [10.34105/j.kmel.2016.08.033](https://doi.org/10.34105/j.kmel.2016.08.033)

⁹ Shachar, M., & Neumann, Y. (2010). Twenty years of research on the academic performance differences between traditional and distance learning: Summative meta-analysis and trend examination. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 6(2), 318–334.

¹⁰ Bowers, J. & Kumar, P. (2015). Students' perceptions of teaching and social presence: A comparative analysis of face-to-face and online learning environments. *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies (IJWLTT)*, 10(1), 27–44. <http://doi.org/10.4018/ijwltt.2015010103>

¹¹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. *Guide for developing high-quality emergency operations plans for institutions of higher education*. Pg. 20. Retrieved from www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-03/emergency-operations-plans_institution-higher-education.pdf

¹² Our research was limited by two factors: 1) schools that actually have academic continuity plans, and 2) schools that make those academic continuity plans public-facing. We encountered dozens of dead ends when searching for public-facing academic continuity plans as many schools have hidden or archived plans developed during the lockdown stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹³ See note 10.

¹⁴ [UMass Ready: A Guide to Academic Continuity Planning and UMass Ready Guide](#), developed by the Office of Emergency Management and Business Continuity at the University of Massachusetts served as our primary rubric against which we assessed the other plans.

¹⁵ Gibbs, et al. (2022). *Universities and multiple disaster scenarios: A transformative framework for disaster resilient universities*. Pg. 5.

¹⁵ García-Morales, V. J., Garrido-Moreno, A., & Martín-Rojas, R. (2021). The transformation of higher education after the COVID disruption: Emerging challenges in an online learning scenario. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 2.