

Pandemic experience will lead students to small colleges



KERRY PRATHER
VIEWPOINT

In mid-October, Franklin College celebrated homecoming. It was a glorious fall day, and our attendance was incredible. Proud Grizzlies came home from all over the country, partly to celebrate the occasion and partly to celebrate another step in the path back to normalcy. There were smiles and laughter, even handshakes and hugs.

COVID is certainly not behind us, but we have learned to manage the environment and still provide most of the student experiences that make small colleges like Franklin so special. The challenges of COVID management have been enormous, but Indiana's small private colleges have stepped up and met those challenges—and

succeeded in serving the needs of our students in person.

The residual effects of the COVID experience provide an encouraging argument for the future prosperity of small private colleges and the uniquely personal relationships that define them. In many respects, only small private colleges managed to preserve the essence of the traditional college experience safely and effectively during the height of the pandemic.

Our students were emphatic after the universal evacuation of campuses in the spring of 2020 that they wanted to return to campus and would comply with whatever restrictions we thought necessary to ensure that safe return. The students held true to their word, and we managed in-person instruction and co-curricular experiences safely. Our students and their parents felt reassured that a small campus could execute such a plan successfully, and we worked very hard to justify their confidence.

Academically, too, the COVID phenomenon appears to

have heightened student interest in and appreciation for the small-college experience. The forced experiment in virtual teaching/learning suggests that tomorrow's college students might be even more eager for a personal, engaged experience.

Tomorrow's college students might be even more eager for a personal, engaged experience

To be sure, both we and our students have learned ways in which technology can supplement the teaching/learning process. I am extremely proud of how efficiently our faculty transitioned to virtual delivery and how well our students adapted out of necessity. We will certainly retain the positive aspects of the virtual experiences, which can provide flexibility and convenience when necessary and be helpful for our

students. However, the net result has been a resounding endorsement of in-person instruction and a renewed appreciation for the many co-curricular opportunities students can only experience on campus.

Some pundits predicted that the experience with virtual education would encourage future college students to permanently retreat to their laptops. Those prognostications appear not only to have been exaggerated but also to be counterintuitive.

Far too many high school students disengaged completely from the remote learning experience. Academic achievement plummeted for many of them in response to the impersonal ways they were forced to learn. That disengagement demonstrated how truly reliant a quality learning experience is on the close, personal interaction between teacher and student.

Parents forced into the role of surrogate teachers developed a renewed respect for the teaching profession. They not only recognized the skills required

to be effective teachers, but also the critical difference quality, in-person instruction and mentoring make in the academic and social development of their children.

Thus, it may well be that the pandemic will actually provide a tailwind for small private colleges. I am encouraged by the renewed appreciation of our current students for the education they are receiving and by the enthusiasm of high school students who visit our campus.

As we progress beyond the various types of distancing that have become commonplace, students are taking a new and serious look at what they most value in their educational journey. I believe that reflection will lead an even greater number of them to seek the small classes, personal attention and lifelong relationships best fostered on the campuses of small, private institutions like Franklin College. We will welcome them with open, caring arms. •

Prather is president of Franklin College.

Changing the way we think about workspaces



JILL MENDOZA
VIEWPOINT

In one of our first face-to-face meetings since the pandemic began, my team and I recently visited a corporate client. As we walked to our meeting space, we passed through a large cafeteria, a cafe and several open collaborative areas. In these areas, designed to accommodate a large, diverse workforce, we could count the people we saw on one hand.

When we arrived at our meeting destination, we found only two of the five meeting participants. The others would join us

remotely. Unfortunately, after 20 minutes of wrestling with state-of-the-art technology, we could see the remote participants on the large screen before us, but they could not see us.

Welcome to today's workplace, a space designed to be timeless and that now seems out of time—and a space that, in that way, might be a metaphor for the way we all do business.

A few years ago, the notion of a global pandemic that would quarantine us for months was the stuff of science fiction. Today, it is reality—and living with that reality will require thinking differently about just about everything. For me specifically, that means thinking differently about the way we design workspaces.

What's important to note is that I didn't say we need to think differently about our workspace designs; I said we have to think

differently about the way we design workspaces. We need a new process, one that can respond in real time to a world in constant evolution.

We are facing a "that was then, this is now" moment. "Then" was a process in which designer and occupants collaborated on a plan intended to last for years. "Now" requires a more integrated model, one in which designer and occupants hold an ongoing conversation about the short- and long-term use of resources and space.

But, again, I'm not just talking about interior design and the corporate world. On the contrary; this shift applies to every aspect of doing business today.

We all must accept that the definitions of even the most common workplace concepts are changing. For example, the prevailing principle of flexibil-

ity dictated until recently that employees should be able to "flex" their working hours, or move from place to place within the workspace. Now, "flexible" is being replaced with "hybrid," which means granting everyone

We must consider how we will redesign our approach to doing business.

the ability to work wherever and whenever, with full access to facilities, resources and infrastructure that were forged in a pre-COVID world.

The big challenge as we shape this hybrid existence is that we won't know what the new way of working looks like until we get people back into the workplace,

into regular contact and into this new rhythm. Whether we're talking about the corporate world, health care, professional services, higher education, whatever—much as we cannot return to the environments of "then" and expect them to meet the needs of "now"—we can't embrace the old processes and expect success in a new world.

In the coming months, we all will have to consider how we will redesign our now sparsely occupied spaces and dysfunctional conference rooms. At the same time, we must also consider how we will redesign our approach to doing business. If we don't, I fear we'll find ourselves floundering in the morass that exists between Then and Now, forever reacting to change instead of creating it. •

Mendoza is founder and CEO of IDO Inc., an Indianapolis-based interior design firm.

letters

IBJ wrong on vaccine

I agree wholeheartedly with Jerry Williams comments [Letter: IBJ is wrong about vaccine mandates, Nov. 26] about your support of Todd Rokita and opposing vaccine mandates [AG Rokita is right to sue Biden administration over vaccine rules, Nov. 12].

Are you out of touch with reality?

For the first time in my 30-plus years of subscribing to the paper, I felt your statement was politically driven and not reality driven. Mandates have been exercised many times by our government to save lives. You apparently have forgotten the history of our country and need a refresher. •

Shelvy Haywood Kegljar

Column unfair to Fauci

It must be so easy to pontificate as Ramesh Ponnuru does in his criticism of Anthony Fauci for discouraging general use of masks early in the pandemic and for increasing estimates of what it would take for herd immunity [Fauci can't use science to excuse his missteps, Forefront, Dec. 10].

Ponnuru ignores the fact

that there was a real shortage of masks in the early days of the pandemic so discouraging general use/hoarding did make sense.

As to vaccination rates for herd immunity, that is still an evolving question. What is not questionable, is the more folks are vaccinated, the less chance of infection from current or new variants.

Ponnuru did get one item correct. The sooner more rapid antigen tests can be made widely available and less expensive the better.

Mark Tarpey

WE WELCOME YOUR LETTERS. Send emails with LETTER in the subject line to ibjeddit@ibj.com or go to www.ibj.com/letters to submit a letter. You can also write to IBJ, One Monument Circle, Suite 300, Indianapolis IN 46204.