

In summer of uncertainty, small is good for colleges

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After finishing the spring semester online, the big question for U.S. Mennonite colleges and universities is what the fall will look like.

One thing they're sure of: It will look different.

The five Mennonite Church USA and two U.S. Mennonite Brethren institutions are planning for both on- and off-campus scenarios as they anticipate a school year with some form of social distancing.

Reopening campus and welcoming students back is the goal, and many of the Mennonite institutions can't afford anything less. Their small size could be an asset, as large schools begin to move online for the fall, unable to offer safety for thousands of students on campus.

"Because we have very few classes of more than 20 students, we are confident that we can provide face-to-face learning even if we are still required to practice social distancing," said Jane Wood, president of Bluffton (Ohio) University, in a press release.

Rebecca Stoltzfus, president of Goshen (Ind.) College, agrees: "This is a moment when it's an advantage to be small."

But it will take more than the attraction of a close-knit community for Mennonite colleges to survive and thrive during the pandemic and beyond.

Joe Manickam, president of Hesston (Kan.) College, observes the struggles of small, liberal arts colleges in Kansas.

"The schools that will survive these next 12 months are the schools that went into COVID-19 with some form of financial stability and are creative and wanting to take risks," Manickam said. "If you don't have both of those pieces, it will be hard to survive."

Each college has taken its own approach to COVID-19 response and reopening, but across the board "next year is the big question mark," Stoltzfus said.

Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kan., has taken the most assertive step toward reopening. On May 4 it became the first of the seven MC USA and USMB colleges to publicly announce plans for reopening campus in phases, leading up to August 3, when academic and athletic start-up events begin.

"Tabor's economy is driven by enrollment, so continuing the plans to open helps assure a strong future," said Tom Shaw, vice president of advancement.

While other Mennonite institutions have made commitments to do everything they can to reopen campus soon and bring students back in the fall, many are waiting on updated state guidelines before making a final decision.

Bluffton plans to welcome students back on campus no later than the start of the regular academic year August 31.

Staff at Bethel College in North Newton, Kan., are working remotely until at least June 1.

Fresno (Calif.) Pacific University announced a commitment to a personalized education experience in its most recent press release. Still, this access will be balanced with safety, as precautions will be taken to protect all on campus through social distancing, sanitizers, masks and other personal protective equipment, blended and online instruction and alternate class and work schedules.

“We would love to see everyone back on our campuses and in classes this fall, and are planning toward that end, but may have to develop a hybrid model of virtual and in-person classes,” said FPU President Joseph Jones, in a news release. “We realize universities, like other public places, are likely to look very different than they did last fall.”

On May 14, Goshen confirmed its first COVID-19 case on campus, noting that the employee had been wearing a mask while working on campus and had followed safe distancing guidelines. No one else on campus was identified to have interacted with the infected person in the prior 48 hours for more than 10 minutes and within 6 feet, as confirmed through contact tracing.

For Goshen, the 2019-20 academic year brought changes even before the arrival of coronavirus.

At the start of the year, changes to its Study Service Term program were announced, with plans to add domestic and local options for students starting next fall. Now with the coronavirus forcing institutions to reimagine cross-cultural experiences, Goshen is one step ahead.

“It is an interesting further disruption that compels us to think about how we do SST in new and different ways,” President Stoltzfus said. “The decision to have fall SST reconceived with two domestic options is along the lines of what we’ve been thinking and reimagining, but this [virus] made it immediate.”

Along with Goshen, Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, requires all undergraduate students to complete a form of cross-cultural engagement.

EMU students will now have the option to enroll in an online summer course on culture and identity to satisfy their cross-cultural requirement.

Goshen reported a decrease in first-year enrollment this past fall, down to 160 undergraduate first-year students, but as of May 1 reported to be on track to hit its enrollment goals, with increases in applications and admitted students.

Bethel also reports positive trends for fall enrollment.

Bethel transitioned to online recruiting software three years ago and is seeing an increase in deposits this year. When travel restrictions were put in place, the college was already placing less emphasis on recruitment travel.

“We’re uniquely set up to not feel the full brunt of travel restrictions other institutions faced at the beginning of the pandemic constraints,” said Tricia Clark, director of institutional communications and marketing.

At Fresno Pacific, more than half of the students commute to campus, said Wayne Steffen, associate director of publications and media relations. A concern is that unemployment will adversely affect enrollment.

The California State University system has announced fall classes will be online, but Steffen said FPU continues to plan for all scenarios.

All seven MC USA and USMB colleges have distributed room-and-board refunds and have begun to offer financial assistance to students through federal government funds from the CARES Act.

Bluffton is issuing \$500 from CARES funding to all full-time undergraduate residential students and \$200 to all traditional undergraduate commuters.

Other institutions have taken a different approach, distributing the funds to a specific number of students deemed eligible.

“Each institution is given the authority to determine how best to allocate these funds to its students based upon the impact to its campus,” an update on Bluffton’s COVID-19 page stated. “We understand that for undergraduate residential students there would have been additional travel costs in coming to and from the residence halls multiple times, as well as costs for setting up learning environments at home, and for traditional, undergraduate face-to-face commuter students there also could have been additional costs for setting up learning environments at home.”

In addition to the CARES Act, small colleges are relying on Paycheck Protection Program loans for financial support.

A revised interpretation of criteria for PPP loans enabled Eastern Mennonite University to qualify. Originally, the inclusion of student employees pushed EMU's count of employees over the limit of 500.

"Since in the earlier interpretations of the loan guidelines we did not meet criteria for PPP CARES Act funding, we temporarily furloughed some employees whose work was impacted by COVID-19 and the closure of our campus," President Susan Schultz Huxman said. "Now having gained approval, we are in the process of bringing back critical staff."

Goshen President Stoltzfus acknowledged that without the PPP loan, the college would have had to face layoffs or furloughs.

But the largely forgivable PPP loan will not be enough to provide ongoing financial security for Mennonite colleges.

"Our revenue for this semester has taken a nosedive," said Hesston President Manickam. "But we made a commitment upfront that we would not lay off or furlough anyone."

Despite the loss of revenue, Hesston continues to move forward with its Vision 2025 plan launched last August, which will add four-year programs focused on careers such as business and engineering.

Many of the unknowns are similar for each college: whether fall athletics will take place, whether students will be able to live on campus, whether all of the uncertainty will hurt enrollment — and whether students will continue to value the unique experience Mennonite colleges offer.

"This unique value proposition in the cluttered higher education market was attractive before the pandemic for many students and parents," EMU President Schultz Huxman said. "This nimble, personalized, unapologetic Christian foundation may be even more important today."