Building Resilience in Turbulent Times

A series of candid discussions about cloud’s role in higher education’s next era
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Introduction

For a millennium, higher education has been a pillar in the foundation that shapes our society: creating new knowledge, sparking economic growth, and influencing social aspirations. The current economic, health, and social crises threaten to disrupt higher education and its ability to fulfill this role in historic ways. But with disruption comes the opportunity for unprecedented change and emergence of more effective and equitable models. It will depend on a generation of leaders who incorporate new tools and thinking to enable institutional resiliency, foster agility, and ensure preparedness for whatever the new future holds.

In this three-part series, Oracle invited institutional leaders from our customer community to explore how technology serves as the foundation for three aspects of resiliency: supporting new work models, sustaining innovation in austerity, and building more equitable financial aid programs. These speakers represent the wide breadth of the industry: community colleges, HBCUs, Research 1 institutions, private liberal arts colleges, etc. Nonetheless, they are united in their commitment to creating a better, more equitable future for tomorrow’s students, and we at Oracle are honored to partner with them.

We are inspired by the innovation and hard work being carried out by our higher ed customers, and hope these leaders’ insights, stories, and advice resonate with you as you continue to build for the future of education.
SESSION 1

Building resiliency in Higher Ed’s new normal

Baylor University, Boise State University, and Rutgers University

PANELISTS

Jo Ellen DiNucci
AVP Finance and Administration, Boise State University

Cheryl Gochis
Chief Human Resources Officer, Baylor University

Ellen Law
AVP OIT Enterprise Application Services, Rutgers University
In less than a fortnight in March 2020, much of higher education moved to virtual operations. It was a heroic achievement. Yet the question remains—COVID-19 is relegated to the history books, what elements of virtual operations will remain and how will the “work of the institution” be transformed? How can institutions become better equipped to come out successfully on the other side?

Nicole Engelbert: This is the first of three virtual panel discussion we'll be having on resiliency in higher education. Our topic today is: when the COVID pandemic is over, what will our new normal look like? What are the elements of our “great migration” to remote working this past spring that will actually stay with us as we chart our new path forward?

Let’s launch an audience poll. Looking back, how prepared was your institution for the COVID-19 crisis?

How prepared do you feel your institution was to respond to a crisis on the scale of COVID-19?

- Prepared enough to get there: 32%
- Learned a lot about where to focus in future: 53%
- Exceptionally well prepared, we are a truly agile institution: 11%
- Other: 5%

It looks like more than half of our respondents felt enough to get there in an orderly way. It looks like more than half of our respondents felt their institutions were prepared enough to get there in an orderly way. But a third are thinking that there’s probably some room for improvement, and that there are future issues that they’ll have to grapple with in the months and years ahead.

Each panelist represents a different part of an institution, but all of your schools had previously brought together finance, HR, academics, IT, with your technology implementations. During this time of current crisis you were able to draw on that connection. Can you talk about that collaboration?

Cheryl Gochis: At Baylor, we were in the middle of a full-scale ERP implementation, so luckily Finance, IT, and HR had locked arms for a very long time prior to this. We had developed relationships where we could give each other straight feedback about the different contexts that we were in, and so that was a great benefit. Many times I thought about the tough meetings we had had prior to the pandemic and how that led to it being more smooth now.

Jo Ellen DiNucci: I agree. I’ve seen a lot of examples where people have reached across the aisle and said, “How can I help?” Student Financials might spend a week answering emails on behalf of the Financial Aid team. It’s “How can our department help your
Our campus, after being live on Oracle Cloud ERP for four years, is now used to constant, quarterly improvements. They’re not so married to their business processes. They trust that we’re going to work through and find something better than what they have today. That changing culture really facilitated adaptation that probably wouldn’t have existed for us if this was four years ago.

Nicole Engelbert: We’ve talked about the value of cloud for quite some time, and its ability to provide maintenance, continuity and transform business processes. What we are going through now requires us to hit on all those cylinders. Ellen and Jo Ellen, both Boise and Rutgers are long-standing ERP Cloud customers. Did being in the cloud have some level of impact on your ability to respond and be proactive through this?

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Ellen Law: I agree with everything you’ve said. Because our business processes were standardized, we were able to look at them and determine any modifications we needed for the remote nature. For example, changing our procurement policies so that would allow those working from home to have a needed resource delivered to their house, such as a PC. The cloud just made that process so much easier to adopt. And that’s a true testament to Oracle.

Nicole Engelbert: What advice would you give to folks in the audience as they’re looking to build their longer-term resiliency? How do you do the business process re-engineering and change management effectively?

Jo Ellen DiNucci: Boise went live on Oracle ERP in July 2016, and moving to the cloud started our shift to paperless workflows and moved us to a much more streamlined method of operation. Since then, we’ve also layered in Smartsheets and DocuSign, and all of those technologies really allowed us to go fully remote quickly.

The other piece of it is the refocus of our culture, from upgrading every 10 years to quarterly enhancements of business processes.

Nicole Engelbert, VP
Higher Education Development, Oracle

Jo Ellen DiNucci, AVP of Finance and Administration, Boise State University

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**Jo Ellen DiNucci:** We’ve been unfair for many years just assuming that the Payroll person will implement the new timestamp module—and it’s just unfair. It puts too much work on one person’s shoulders and they don’t have the right skillset. So my first piece of advice is to recognize that immediately and build out your own team that you will dedicate to implementation.

**Ellen Law:** You need to realize that you are disrupting these end users’ worlds, and now they have to revamp the way they’re doing everything. Having empathy and understanding when you’re talking about these changes really helps.

**Nicole Engelbert:** Right now it is hard to imagine that this will be in the rear mirror, but it will be. How will what has happened shaped the direction of our future and the way we do finance, HR, IT, or even the mission of higher education?

**Ellen Law:** I think some aspect of our work is now going to have the “60 second commute,” and I think that could help us as far as our workforce potential. We no longer need to hire someone who’s local, especially if they have the skills that we need, and I think that will give us a broader applicant base.

**Jo Ellen DiNucci:** We’re thinking about the value of space. We have scenarios on our campus where one person has three offices and that’s expensive. So how do you effectively implement remote working for people who want it? And then on the flip side, how do you “hotel” space? Or what do you do to try and reduce the cost? If we do that, we can invest in needed programs or reduce tuition.

From the academic side, our president has come in with a vision for Boise State to deliver all classes both in-person and online. If students have to go home and take care of a sick parent or a sick child, they can keep learning. Our IT team is upgrading all of the remote teaching technology and retrofitting all of the classrooms to allow for cameras that will follow the professors around. We’ll come out of COVID with a delivery method that really allows for accessibility and retention in a lot of scenarios where people haven’t been able to access education.

**Nicole Engelbert:** This might be the best I’ve felt in a while about higher ed. Hearing about Rutgers, Baylor, and Boise feels like we might
I know Rutgers has a brand-new president, and it’s tricky to onboard as a new president with remote operations. But Dr. Jonathan Holloway has a really great quote that I want to read. “In every moment of disappointing challenge, you have an option. You can choose to be mired in your anger and frustration and disappointment—or commit yourself to finding an opportunity in that moment.” To me, that’s resiliency, finding the way forward. I want each one of you to offer recommendations for how to build that resiliency.

Cheryl Gochis: I think as a leader, really taking time to process everything you have learned. And making sure you’re taking care of yourself and modeling that self-care for your teams is important.

Ellen Law: One of the things that I talk to my leadership team about is, “Don’t leave anyone out.” Make sure that their managers and their directors are including everyone and making them still feel like they’re part of a team. We are going to have a ton of different initiatives that are going to come out of this and we’re continually going to have to up our game. We just need to make sure we’re all in it together.
Innovating in Higher Ed when the budget drops out

University of Kansas, Skidmore College, and Spring Arbor University

PANELISTS

Diane Goddard
Chief Financial Officer
University of Kansas

Dwane Sterling
Chief Technology Officer
Skidmore College

Randall Melton
Chief Information Officer
Spring Arbor University
As higher education institutions enter the fall semester, they are encumbered by a series of financial constraints, exacerbated by the loss of spring and summer revenue, budget cuts, declining enrollments, and heavy expenditures on COVID-related campus safety measures. Yet despite—or rather, because of—all these issues, funding long-term projects to support institutional sustainability and future growth is more critical than ever. What strategies and tactics can institutional leaders leverage to keep the spark of innovation alive? How do they navigate the balance between spending money on technology versus cutting institutional costs?

Nicole Engelbert: We have speakers representing three very different types of institutions today: a large public university, a small liberal arts college, and a private faith-based college in the Midwest. But they likely share some common threads as well. What are the institutional challenges you’re currently facing?

Dwane Sterling: This is an interesting time to be at Skidmore because we don’t know what the future is going to hold. Perhaps the biggest challenge that we have—outside of not knowing what enrollment is going to look like—is how to create an infrastructure that allows us the flexibility we need to adapt to situations like this.

Diane Goddard: This is presenting our institution with the opportunity to reassess where is KU right now? Where does it want to be in the future? And how do we get there? When it comes to reimagining or strengthening a university, technology is always key to that. COVID is now stretching our organization to truly rethink where we are headed in five to 10 years, and we are marshalling our resources and helping our staff through change management so we’re prepared to make those changes.

Randall Melton: What has been challenging for Spring Arbor is that there’s been a big drop in high school graduates across Michigan that has impacted our enrollment. We’ve also been going through constant budget-tuning on an annual basis, and our main goal is to be prepared to tweak our budget if we have an outbreak.

Nicole Engelbert: How do you build the bridge between the desire to innovate tomorrow with the present reality of a budget?

Dwane Sterling: I always look internally first and see whether or not there’s some savings that we can find to begin with. There are times when we know we need to do something new and fancy, and other times where we can reconfigure what we have done in the past and innovate that way. The easiest way for us to decide if we will change a process is if by doing so, we can save employees’ time to focus on something more impactful.

Diane Goddard: At Kansas, we went through an extensive administrative savings exercise called Changing for Excellence that involved 11 different cost savings initiatives at once. We measured not only the dollars saved but the dollars generated by these initiatives.
We also tracked the time spent on business processes, and then eliminated or streamlined those processes that were taking staff eight to ten hours. We then instituted new procedures so that the time that our staff saved could be devoted towards something else. We also spent a lot of time helping our staff learn their new responsibilities and giving them the tool sets they need to be successful.

**Randall Melton:** Just as institutions have technical debt, they also have policy and business process debt; we knew that Spring Arbor needed to fix this debt. We were on a legacy solution for over 20 years. Our financial aid packaging was managed by spreadsheets—you can imagine the pain point of that! It was an easy decision to move to Oracle Cloud from a total cost of ownership perspective. Our costs are now running 14% lower than what they were, and we are predicting a 25% reduction in cost over the first five years. I think COVID will challenge us all to be online and to automate our business processes. As we look to the next 20 years, we felt that Oracle has the tools and commitment to support us. This whole enablement of the Oracle technology stack and services is going to help us reframe our business.

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**Randall Melton, Chief Information Officer, Spring Arbor University**

_Nicole Engelbert:_ From our previous panel with Boise, Rutgers, and Baylor, the leaders were clear that getting through crisis requires institutional leadership to come together. To what extent does this hold true, and can you give me examples of how it has enabled the institution to innovate?

**Diane Goddard:** If you don’t have the absolute backing of your leadership, it’s almost impossible to be successful. For example, one of our biggest initiatives was to institute shared service centers, which achieved a considerable amount of savings—but also impacted every single person on campus. The pushback was incredible! We succeeded because we had the full support of leadership across the campus, and we were also very transparent with our stakeholders. This allowed me to address any concerns and make any shifts necessary to meet those concerns, without ever having to worry that we were going to pull the project back.

**Dwane Sterling:** It’s all about being able to build relationships with other departments. If we in IT do those things which we are expected to do, it gives us a lot more leverage to have conversations about innovation. If I provide excellent support for people, they’ll invite us to be a part of broader institutional conversations.

It’s easy for us on the technology side to get wrapped up in a negative mentality of saying no and listing limitations. I tell my staff, “People are going to be asking us for crazy things we likely cannot do, but let’s challenge ourselves one step further to present to them a number of options of things that we can do.” That mindset has been received positively,
and it’s allowing IT to be the glue that binds the leadership team together.

**Randall Melton:** Building trust is a continuous process. What we want to do is make sure that the organization understands that we’re going to work on their behalf to help meet their business objectives. Our goal is to present business users with a solution that meets their business needs, and even exceeds their expectations, but also connects to the broader set of systems that we have.

**Nicole Engelbert:** Can each one of you talk about where you are in your cloud journey, and the type of change you’ve experienced or anticipate experiencing as a result of this shift? Do you see your cloud transformation potentially supports your ability to innovate or find costs savings?

**Diane Goddard:** When we moved to Oracle Cloud ERP in 2017, one of the main things that we wanted to get away from was the thousands of customizations that prevented us from easily upgrading every time there was an upgrade available. I wanted a system that we would use as it was delivered. I didn’t want to be known as the university that had the best payables system in the world! We wanted to be known for innovation that we can provide our researchers and our faculty. I wanted a vendor to manage the basic systems that we all have.

Oracle Cloud ERP allows us to pivot our resources into thinking about new and exciting ways to support what the university really needs to be delivering and everything that differentiates us from every other university in the world.

**Dwane Sterling:** People think if we’re not doing customizations, we’re less versatile. But that’s not the case. The versatility an institution may get just from the system being up to date is incredible. With old, on-prem systems, we tell ourselves that we’ll stay current with the new updates that come out, but instead we end up going several years without ever updating. It’s going to be a change for Skidmore to get to the point where we have the processes in place for quarterly updates, but it’s a welcome change.

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**Dwane Sterling, Chief Technology Officer, Skidmore College**

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**Diane Goddard, Chief Financial Officer, University of Kansas**

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Randall Melton: Just like the other speakers said, our customizations were out of control, and this is going to be a reset for us. With Oracle Cloud we’ll have the opportunity to customize where we need, but also preserve the integrity of the software. I love the shared security responsibility model we’re establishing with Oracle, where Oracle will handle the security and allows us to focus on other priorities.
SESSION 3

Ensuring Higher Ed affordability

Florida A&M University, Lorain County Community College, and Butler University

PANELISTS

Steven Hahn
Senior Director, Student Strategy, Huron Consulting Group

Carrie Short
Director, Financial Services, Lorain County Community College

Melissa Smurdon
Director of Financial Aid, Butler University

William E. Hudson Jr.
Ph.D, Vice President Student Affairs, Florida A&M University
The scale of financial need from COVID-19 will dwarf the global economic recession and undermine the credibility of current financial aid practices. Technology will be vital to delivering more agility and finding space for services such as advisement. Yet significant questions remain about how to create this financial aid office of the future.

What does the structure of a more resilient, agile financial aid office entail? How can institutions address the challenge of moving from manual to largely automated financial aid processes? How must financial aid be transformed in order to serve a generation disrupted by pandemic and recession?

**Nicole Engelbert:** The last nine months might have been the most difficult nine months in higher education since perhaps even World War II. So let’s start with a “State of the Union” for each of your institutions.

**Melissa Smurdon:** At the inception of the coronavirus pandemic, Butler committed additional aid to our returning and incoming students, as well as a one year grant for students having a significant change in financial circumstances. I’m already putting forth the request that we can do that next year; we know our families are not done facing financial impacts.

**Carrie Short:** At LCCC, we’re dealing with students who wanted to continue in their classes but lacked internet access because they’re in rural areas. There was a lot of fast thinking and shuffling to get resources together, so when students were reaching out to student services, we had an ongoing list of providers with free internet service. But unfortunately, there just are some areas without access to reliable internet and the effects that those students experience will be felt for quite some time.

**Dr. William Hudson:** At Florida A&M University, approximately between 60 and 70% of our students are Pell eligible. We are very conscientious about our student loan debt. That’s very important to us, particularly for the population that we serve. We are a school that does very well with social mobility: if a student who gets a degree from our institution, in many cases, that student will make more with that degree than what the family income is presently. And so that’s the significance of a college education for the first-generation, economically disadvantaged students that we serve.

**Nicole Engelbert:** As we look towards a post-COVID world, what are the shifts in financial aid policy and processes that can better address the financial needs of students and their families?

**Melissa Smurdon:** There’s a lot I’d like to see on the federal front: FAFSA simplification and establishing the best structure for student loans and repayments and other complicated policy decisions. We’ve got to start reinventing this process, to make more funds available to the students who need it. I know that that my
like free childcare that can help them have a better future.

You mention affordability and everybody automatically goes to tuition and fees. But there are a lot of underlying and indirect costs of education, especially at a community college, where not all of our students are the traditional age or might not be living at home with parents.

Nicole Engelbert: Something I’m hearing from each of you that we have to have more progressive ideas about what is actually the cost of attendance.

Throughout this series that we’ve been doing on resiliency, one thing that’s come up multiple times is that in a time of crisis, sometimes a window opens. And for the brave willing to go through that window, there’s an opportunity to drive change that would not have been possible before. Have you been able to drive digital transformation and technology change that would not have been possible previously? And if so, how has the financial aid office been able to navigate that path?
Melissa Smurdon: One of the things that’s prominent on my mind is: how do we serve students? And sometimes the video call or the Zoom with a family is really helpful. Maybe it’s a high-need family out of state and Butler’s their dream, but coming and visiting multiple times to get their questions answered is not going to happen. Now we can carve out the right time to have a more thorough conversation with families and help them build their financial knowledge to make a sound decision about college.

Dr. William Hudson: We engaged Oracle maybe a year or two ago, after looking at some mechanisms to leverage technology to better serve our students. We wanted to improve our business processes because we believe in providing an excellent student experience. We looked at where we’re doing manual processing that could be transitioned to automated processing. And so we began with the financial aid office, and invested funds for Oracle Student Financial Planning. Hopefully we’ll go live pretty soon, and we’ll be able to give some numbers on how it’s improved our time to delivery to students with verification and other processes.

Steven Hahn: This year has been very clarifying for higher education in general, and financial aid in particular. It has reaffirmed the mission of higher education to provide access to education and reaffirmed the mission of financial aid to protect the vulnerable in that. As our speakers have noted today, it is ironic how much connection can be achieved through distance. Different modalities and new types of access can allow greater connection with our students’ families.

Finally, I also think that this has caused us to re-examine what our people are doing and how to use them most effectively. Is it possible to automate what we used to do? Not in an effort to lay off or get rid of staff, but in an effort to refocus and get our people out into the community. COVID has been greatly motivating for schools to consider, “When we all come out of this, what do I want my financial aid people to be doing? What do I want my office to look like?”

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Dr. William Hudson, Senior Director, Student Strategy, Huron Consulting Group

Nicole Engelbert: I know each one of you is midstream or at the end of implementing a major shift in your financial aid office with SFP. As you’re creating that financial aid office of the future, and thinking about the ways technology can help: what is the one thing that can make the difference? Is it automation? Is it integrated communications? Is it giving students the tools to have more agency?

Dr. William Hudson: My one thing I’m excited about is the Oracle platform, and how it’ll help us improve our business processes by moving away from manual processes. I’m hoping through SFP and through leveraging technology, that we’ll be able to focus a lot more on assisting those students and having communication with the
I’m hoping through SFP, we’ll be able to focus a lot more on assisting our students and having better communication with parents and students and our community agencies on how to help our students reach their full potential.

**Steven Hahn:** We’re going to get through the pandemic, but the effects of it will linger on. It’s not just something to be recovered from, but a challenge for us to inspire us to adapt our systems and to be flexible with our people to address the challenges that will remain. The clarion call that I see is to continue the initiatives, the creativity and innovation, because we’ll need it well into the future after the pandemic has passed.

**Melissa Smurdon:** We disbursed aid with SFP in the fall, and on the heels of that, we’re getting ready for the next year. When I look ahead, we hope to make a lot of gains this year in embracing its automation. And down the road, I hope for things like chatbots, where the student can get their questions answered, even if it’s 11:58 PM. If we could put personalized answers in their hands—“What does it mean to have this loan?” and those kinds of things—it continues to free up staff to have more complex conversations with families. It would mean that we’re there for all the different students that are out there.
Further exploration

Building resiliency webinars

Building Resiliency in Higher Education's New Normal →

Innovating in Higher Education When the Budget Drops Out →

Ensuring Affordability in Higher Education →

Additional resources

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Higher Education Institutions Join Forces in the Cloud →

Inside Higher Ed's 2020 Survey of College and University Business Officers →

Leveling the Playing Field: A Student-Centric Approach to Higher Education's Affordability Crisis →


New Realities for Higher Education: Technology and the Campus Transformed →

Oracle Live: The Time Is Now →

Customer stories

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Butler University goes live with Oracle Student Cloud →

Reimagining your financial aid operation to provide a student-centric experience →

Solving the financial aid puzzle →

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