



D2L

**Why We Need to Act Now
to Build Resilient Higher
Education Institutions**

Introduction

The challenges facing higher education can seem daunting. Looking at the past year only, faculty and administrators have had to adapt course delivery methods almost overnight to provide continuity of learning and colleges and universities have grappled with a range of challenges from decreased enrollment and funding to student stress and disengagement. Undergraduate enrollment alone declined across the board in 2020 and 2021, with community colleges being impacted significantly and seeing a more than 11% reduction in just the spring of 2021.¹

Although the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated vulnerabilities, it's also afforded us opportunities to look forward and understand how we can build institutions that are better able to withstand disruptions and thrive in the future. Shaping long-term, sustainable institutional resilience must go beyond short-term reactionary solutions. Instead, it's about creating future-oriented programs backed by robust strategies, flexible tools and scalable technologies.

Shaping long-term resilience means going beyond short-term solutions—creating future-forward models backed by robust strategies, flexible tools and scalable technologies.



We need to act to build resilient higher education institutions that enable everyone—students, faculty and institutions themselves—to be successful, now and into the future.

In this white paper, we'll explore:

- Why resilience is important,
- How we define resilience, and
- What components make up a resilient institution.

Why Resilience Is Important

The challenges higher education is facing aren't in themselves new. Institutions have, for example, been weathering reductions in state funding for years. Between 2008 and 2019, per-student spending dropped an average of 13% across all states and by more than 30% in six.² What the pandemic has done is magnified, accelerated and compounded trends and forces that were already in motion—including growing financial pressures, evolving workforce needs and shifting student preferences—and reinforced how important it is that

institutions have **adaptable, responsive and robust practices and processes** in place to meet and mitigate future disturbances.

The **good news** is that we know the challenges we're up against.

The **opportunity** is that we must take action today to put the systems in place that will help higher education not only survive but also thrive



Increasing Financial Pressures

Today colleges and universities face a myriad of financial pressures, from limited external funding to decreasing enrollment and other, more unusual changes, such as rising operating deficits caused by lost revenue from sources like services and athletics.

A review of budget and revenue data from institutions across the U.S. revealed some startling statistics, including a 14% average decline in revenues from 2020 to 2021. In dollars, this is what that looks like:

- \$85 billion in lost revenue
- \$24 billion in additional COVID-19-related expenses
- \$74 billion less in government funding

Up-front spending now may be worth it for what it will save—and generate—down the road

In total, projected cuts and losses amount to \$183 billion across the sector.³ Short-term solutions to address these challenges may include freezing hiring, cutting faculty or delaying major projects, but they are, as the name suggests, temporary.

Governments have in many cases stepped in to offer support to help colleges and universities persevere through the crisis. The Cares Act, passed in March 2020, included \$14 billion for educational institutions,⁴ and the stimulus bill passed in March 2021 provided an additional nearly \$40 billion.⁵ There are, however, more challenges on the horizon. In Canada, for example, some provinces appear to be ready to implement performance-based funding models for higher education institutions starting in the next year.⁶

These hurdles—both the ones we’re facing right now and the ones we anticipate—have reinforced how important it is for higher education institutions to seek solutions and invest in models that can enable them to confront the challenges ahead. Spending now may be worth it for what it will save, and generate, down the road. Responses to the pandemic have already revealed how agile colleges and universities can be. Now we need to find ways to make that adaptability part of the long-term plan.

Read more about the challenges higher education institutions are facing in 2021. [Download our survey](#), featuring insights from chief academic officers across the U.S.

Shifting Workforce Demands

Beyond the campus, there's another major stakeholder with the potential to drive transformative change in higher education: employers. Given the rate of organizational and technological innovation, the need for learning is greater than ever, but what knowledge and skills are employers looking for? And, more importantly, where can they and their employees go to find them?

Though academic qualifications are still an important part of the recruitment and screening process for candidates, more organizations are dropping or de-prioritizing requirements for postsecondary degrees. Examples include prominent companies from a variety of sectors—Google, Apple, Tesla, Slack and the Bank of America, to name a few.⁷

Institutions have shown they can be agile and adapt to short-term challenges. Now they need to make that agility and adaptability part of the long-term plan.

The reality is that while in the past the hard and soft skills a person learned in their teens and 20s could easily follow them through their careers, the emergence of new technologies and the rapid evolution of business practices means learning needs to become a lifelong, continuous pursuit.

While companies are developing their own approaches to training their workforces, programs and degrees offered by higher education institutions remain valuable commodities.





\$668

Median weekly income for people in the U.S. with a high school degree but without college education

2017 data⁸

\$1,193

Median weekly income for people in the U.S. with a bachelor's or advanced degree

2017 data⁸

Students also remain optimistic. In a survey conducted in December 2020, when asked, based on their experience, whether their institutions were providing online educational experiences that set students up for success, 65% of college students sampled said yes.⁹

But optimism alone isn't going to sustain higher education over the long term. In 2019, Tim Cook, Apple's CEO, spoke about the "mismatch" between the skills students learn versus the skills they need, and said that about 50% of the company's U.S.-based employees didn't have a four-year degree.¹⁰

Institutions must collaborate with private and public sector partners to build 21st-century models of continuous learning that enable schools, people, companies and communities to thrive—and there's ample opportunity here for colleges and universities ready to do this.

Find out how institutions can accelerate the shift to a learning-integrated model.

[Download our white paper](#)

⁸ <https://work.chron.com/average-salary-college-degree-1861.html>

⁹ <https://thirdway.imgix.net/downloads/one-semester-later-how-prospective-and-current-college-students-perspectives-of-higher-ed-have-changed-between-august-and-december-2020/Student-Survey-Toplines.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.businessinsider.com/apple-ceo-tim-cook-why-college-degree-isnt-necessary-2019-3>

Evolving Student Needs

Just as technological and organizational changes are affecting what workforces at large are expecting from higher education, so too are they affecting individual students, both who they are and what they're looking to gain. The reality is that college-age populations are shrinking. According to research from McKinsey, the number of high school graduates in the U.S. is expected to peak at 3.6 million in 2026 and decrease to 3.3 million by 2030.¹¹ This demographic shift is compelling colleges and universities to consider not only how they'll attract students out of high school but also how they'll draw in adult and professional learners—whether that's by keeping graduates in their orbit or by appealing to new audiences.

A term we're all familiar with by now is lifelong learning. Though often used, it's been difficult to define. It's come to encompass every piece of learning we undertake in our lives, from traditional credentialed education and structured training to informal knowledge and skills acquisition, and is often a voluntary, self-driven exercise for the individual.¹² Rather than lifelong learning, D2L redefined it as a learning-integrated life, “where individuals are always in a learning mindset and intensive and episodic opportunities for learning are woven through the fabric of our lives, preparing us for successful careers and rich life experiences.”¹³

Some of the delivery methods colleges and universities are considering to better meet the needs of adult or professional learners include:

- **Micro-Credentials:** These rapid training programs are frequently offered virtually, though some schools may include in-person components depending on the nature of the subject matter. They're often developed in close collaboration with employers, so the skills learners walk away with are the ones employers are looking for and need.
- **Blended or Online Continuing Education (Including Non-Credit Courses):** Other continuing education programs may be slightly longer in duration, spanning six to 24 months. Programs are generally designed to be flexible so professional learners can complete many of the components on their own schedules and program completion may result in a certificate recognizing the individual's accomplishment.
- **Minimesters:** These are reduced versions of a regular semester, usually ranging from four to 14 weeks, in which learners have an opportunity to take a rapid but deep dive into a given subject.

Learn more about how colleges and universities can help a learning-integrated life approach.

[Download our white paper](#)



For adult learners, speed can be of the essence, and these types of offerings reflect that. In a survey of over 1,000 people over the age of 18 conducted by D2L and the Innovation Research Group between December 2020 and January 2021, 44% of respondents agreed that the continuing education courses and training available to them took too long to complete.¹⁴

The good news is that, as eager as students are to return to normal soon, they're also more engaged in and excited about the opportunities online learning can bring in the future. In a survey that included more than 1,400 students registered at institutions across the U.S., 57% reported being more optimistic about online learning now than they were prior to the pandemic, and 46% said they wanted to be able to take some courses in a fully online format after the pandemic.¹⁵

A global student survey commissioned by Chegg.org found similar results on an international scale, with 48% of the more than 16,000 undergraduate students surveyed in 21 countries saying they wanted more access to online education after the pandemic is over.¹⁶ The challenges can seem daunting. Yet, for institutions ready to build resilient, future-oriented strategies, the benefits can be significant—making the college or university a key player in meeting future skill demands for the workforce and individuals and driving long-term growth and sustainability.



LEARNING-INTEGRATED LIFE

One where individuals are always in a learning mindset and intensive and episodic opportunities for learning are woven through the fabric of our lives, preparing us for successful careers and rich life experiences.

Defining Resilience in Higher Education

When we think about resilience from a personal point of view, we often think of an individual being able to adapt to or recover from change. But for organizations and institutions, resilience is about more than simply responding to change—it’s about actively anticipating and mitigating against future disturbances. There are three key qualities that can help make higher education institutions more resilient: awareness, adaptability and agility.

1. AWARENESS

One of the hallmarks of a resilient institution is that it understands the challenges it will or could face in the future. If left unaddressed, challenges could result in learning disruption as well as operational or financial disruption. Usually, challenges will have two key characteristics: the speed at which they move and the source from which they originate.

		SPEED ¹⁷	
		GRADUAL	SUDDEN
SOURCE	INTERNAL Internal drivers originate from within the institution.	Gradual and expected changes can be easier to prepare for because it’s easier to determine what will change, when and how it will happen, and who will be affected. The impacts take time to set in, but once they arrive, they tend to be lasting.	Sudden and unexpected changes tend to cause greater, more severe shocks. The impacts of sudden changes are felt immediately, though they may cool down over the long term.
	EXTERNAL External drivers come from outside the institution.	Example: Faculty retirements, physical infrastructure degradation	Example: Unexpected administrative changes
		Example: Demographic changes within the population, student preference changes (learning modes, majors, etc.)	Example: Natural disasters, pandemics, funding support

2. ADAPTABILITY

Once institutions know the type of challenges they may face in the future, they must build the capacity to address them when they do arise so disruptions don't significantly derail the delivery of education or business operations.

AT AN INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL...	AT A TECHNOLOGICAL LEVEL...	AT A PERSONAL LEVEL...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What systems and solutions does the institution have in place or need? Will they stand up against a range of disruptions or only specific ones?• What challenges can current operating models withstand? What can't they? In what ways could operating models change?• What communication strategies and channels should be used to provide updates to the college or university community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Will the technology currently in use scale and adapt quickly if needed?• If technology goes down, who will be the go-to contact for support? Have there been significant incidents of downtime before? How often and under what circumstances?• Is technology accessible for all students? Will students with limited internet connectivity still be able to access content and participate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are students themselves equipped to adapt? Do they have the technological and structural supports they may need?• Are faculty ready to pivot? Do they have the right tools, and do they know how to use them?

3. AGILITY

Beyond knowing what types of challenges they may be up against and how they'll respond, institutions must be ready to move intentionally and nimbly—especially when the challenges they're facing have come on rapidly.

SUCCESS CHECKLIST

Contract negotiations that include IT, legal, and other stakeholders.

Share with your community.

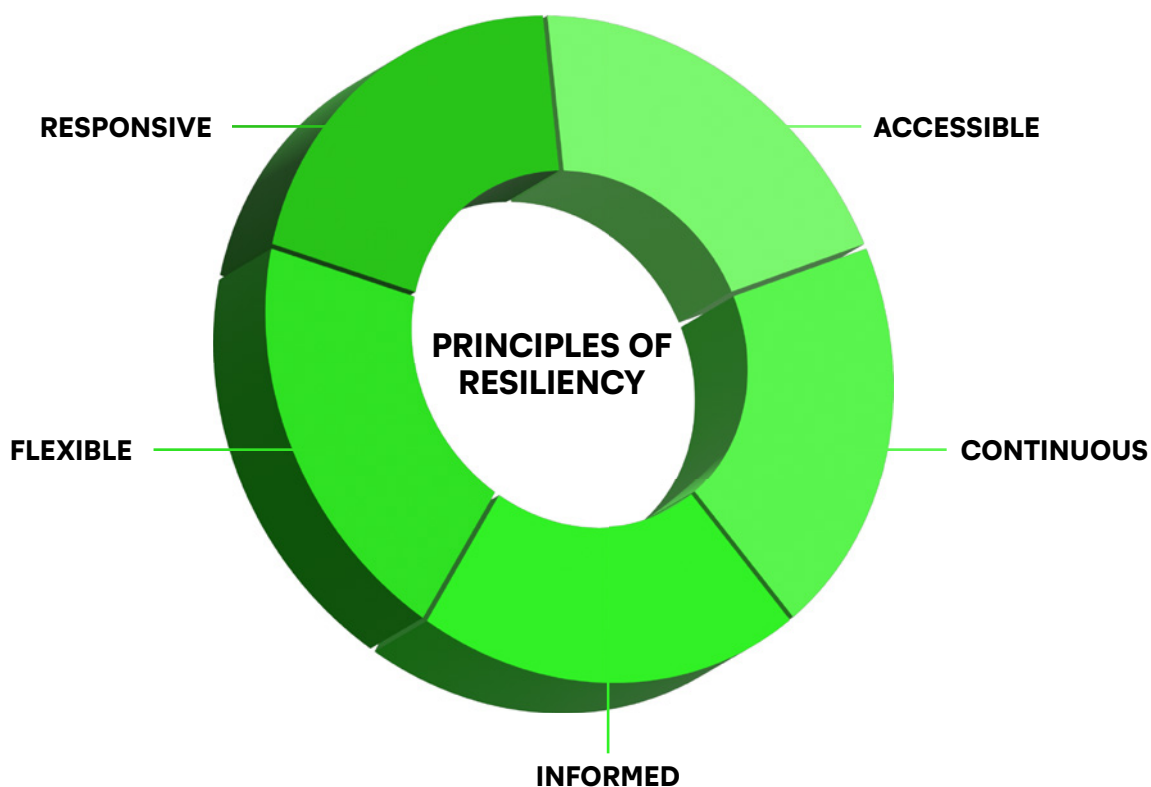


Five Guiding Principles for Building Resilient Higher Education Institutions

Now more than ever is when institutions need to learn from the challenges the pandemic has brought and build the capacity to confront future disruptions. That means reflecting on how the pandemic impacted the institution and others like it to identify which responses worked and where additional resources will be needed in the future to support faculty, staff and students. There's also a powerful case to be made for looking beyond higher education, seeking solutions and innovative practices that could be adapted from private and public sector organizations.

That more disturbances will come isn't a matter of if. It's a matter of when. Investing in institutional agility and resilience, professional development for faculty and robust digital learning infrastructures today may be the key to staying solvent tomorrow.

As we seek to create resilient higher education institutions that are ready to adapt to confront the challenges we know are coming and react to the ones we may not expect, there are five principles we can rely on to guide us.





1. EDUCATION SHOULD BE ACCESSIBLE

Learning and continuing education opportunities need to be affordable, accessible and attainable for people of all abilities and from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

2. EDUCATION SHOULD BE FLEXIBLE

Educational experiences need to be flexible. That means helping and allowing people to architect their unique career paths and making it easy for them to consume and interact with content.

3. EDUCATION SHOULD BE RESPONSIVE

Education opportunities need to be able to adapt to reflect the evolving needs of an institution's student population and the workforce. What skills do people want to acquire to make a move in their careers, and what skills are employers looking for to help their organizations adapt and thrive?

4. EDUCATION SHOULD BE CONTINUOUS

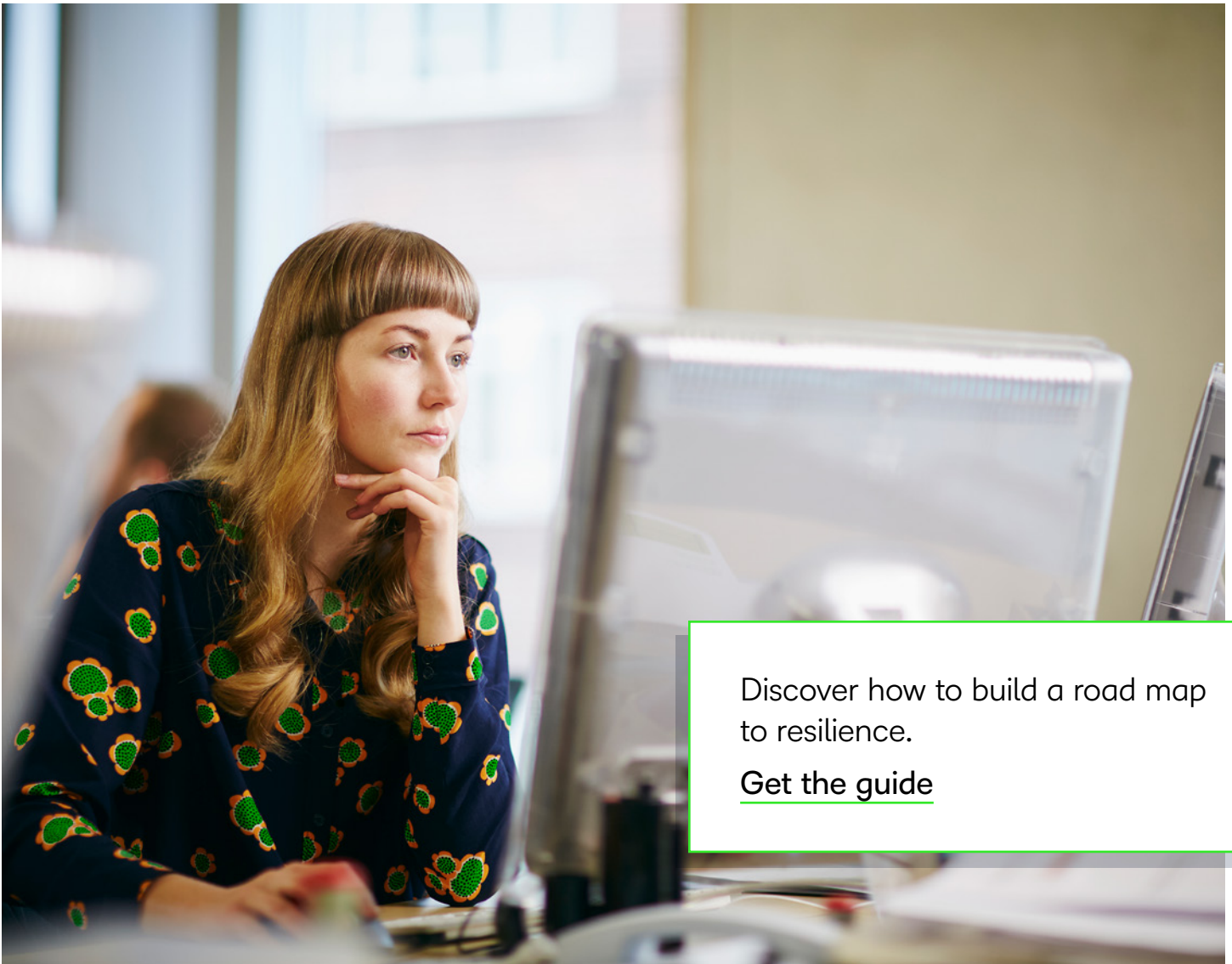
To build resilient institutions, we need to make learning a lifelong pursuit where students don't complete a single degree but are encouraged and enabled to take advantage of ongoing learning opportunities throughout their careers.

5. EDUCATION SHOULD BE INFORMED

Institutions need to be able to make informed decisions about the programs they're offering so they can enhance learning and assessment experiences, improve outcomes and success rates and deliver the relevant skill-building that students, workforce partners and other stakeholders expect.

Make Resilience Part of a Long-Term Strategic Plan

For many, the challenges brought on and exacerbated by the pandemic have reinforced just how important institutional resilience is. As we look forward to the end of this crisis and see a return to normalcy on the horizon, we're presented with an invaluable opportunity to learn the lessons while they're still fresh in our minds. Now is the time to implement more accessible, flexible, responsive, continuous and informed educational models that enable institutions to not only weather future storms but also thrive.



Discover how to build a road map to resilience.

[Get the guide](#)



ABOUT D2L

D2L is a global learning innovation company, reshaping the future of education and work. We're leading the way into a new era of personalized learning, driven by the belief that everyone deserves access to high-quality education, regardless of their age, ability or location. Our signature technology products—D2L Brightspace and D2L Wave—enhance the learning experience for millions of learners at every stage of life, from the earliest days of school to the working world. Learn more at [D2L.com](https://www.d2l.com).

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