

Colleges may never go 'back to normal'

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College campuses may never go back to normal, according to UW-Milwaukee Chancellor Mark Mone.

"There is no getting back to normal," Mone said during a virtual Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce meeting. "We're not going back to what we had before."

College campuses can expect long-term decreases in physical footprints and will struggle to maintain pre-pandemic enrollment numbers, according to Milwaukee-area university leadership.

Marquette University's current freshman class is 16 percent smaller than that of the previous year, according to Marquette's President Michael Lovell.

Vicki Martin, president of Milwaukee Area Technical College, expressed concerns about increasing numbers of students opting to take gap years.

"That gap year is going to cost them in lifetime earnings about \$90,000," she said.

MATC is attempting to eliminate such potential wealth disparities by investing in early college programs for high school students, Martin added.

Some pandemic-driven changes positively impact universities, according to the panel.

While at-home schooling is an adjustment, online learning lowers tuition and can create a more diverse student body, Lovell said.

“It’s actually going to be more accessible and more relevant to the next generation of health care providers,” Medical College of Wisconsin President Dr. John Raymond said of his school’s modified learning. “We’re going to be a better institution because of the pandemic.”

This year, the college admitted its largest class ever, highlighting an increased demand for health care professionals as Wisconsin remains a COVID-19 hot spot, Raymond said.

University health care programs will continue to grow while others less relevant to pandemic challenges may shrink over the next five years as demands adjust with an ongoing health crisis, according to Lovell.

Online learning offers opportunities for higher learning, according to Mone. He explained that curriculum becomes more accessible when it’s transferred to online formats, creating a new platform for competition between schools.

“It’s not just going online,” he said. “You’ve got to go online better.”

Optimizing an in-person feel through digitized chat rooms and personalization is just one potential area for growth. Increased use of technology can help universities

reach “people left behind,” like unemployed degree-seekers, those with unfinished degrees and those in corrections systems, Mone said.

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