

ELASTIC DESIGN: EQUITABLE ACCESS IN A POST-PANDEMIC LANDSCAPE

UPON OUR EVENTUAL RETURN TO THE COLLEGE, OUR WORKPLACE WILL NOT BE WHAT WE REMEMBER. THE INVOLUNTARY EXPERIMENT OF REMOTE OPERATIONS HAS PERMANENTLY ALTERED THE WAY IN WHICH WE WORK. FOR MANY OF US, IT WILL NEVER BE THE SAME.

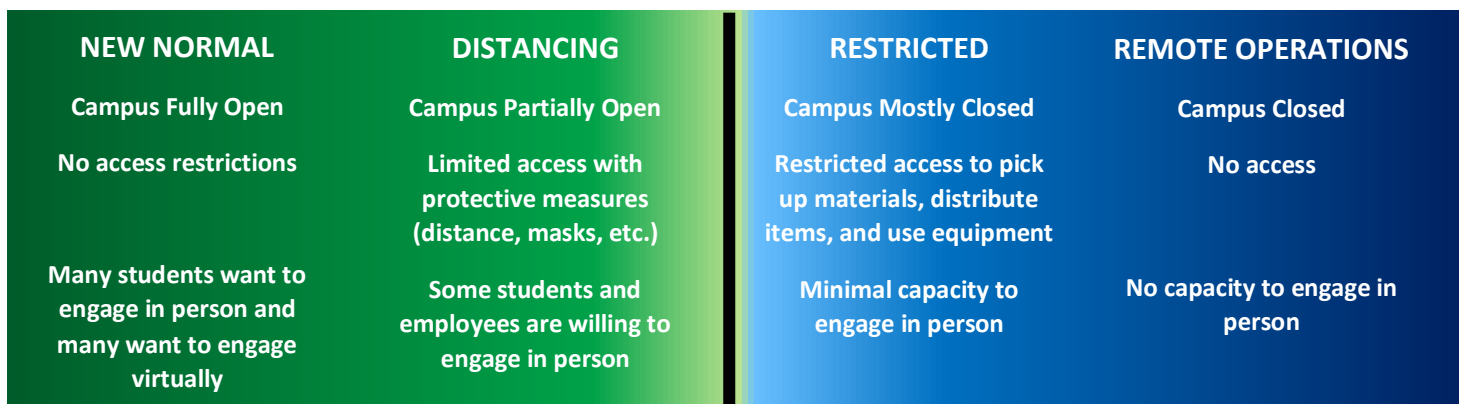
At the beginning of Spring 2020, ARC adopted its [Educational Master Plan](#) with ten imperatives to guide us through a future wrought with uncertainty, but it wasn't clear how the journey would begin. In the Covid-19 environment, our realities have changed and there is a new sense of urgency to many of these critical imperatives such as *adapting the physical campuses* and *achieving operational effectiveness*. It's unlikely that ARC will ever return to its pre-pandemic self, so the intriguing question to ponder is what ARC should become as our world transforms and we return to the college?

2020-2021 OUTLOOK: PERPETUAL CHANGE

We now know that summer and fall will continue to be primarily remote, online operations with minimal use of our campus facilities. Over the next year and beyond, it's very possible that we will swing back and forth along the pendulum shown below so we need to be prepared to quickly adjust our approach as conditions suddenly change. Moreover, personal safety will remain an ongoing concern, particularly for employees and students in high-risk categories who may be compelled to remain at home despite the relaxation of state and local restrictions.

Workplace norms are also rapidly evolving and we should not be surprised when some of our employees share in the growing interest in continuing to work from home, at least part of the time. According to a recent [Gartner study](#), 74% of companies intend to permanently shift a portion of their workforce to remote arrangements. Moving in this direction has implications not only for how we prepare students for careers, but also for how we operate. Student expectations are also changing. Spring semester was both a forced experiment and a grace period. As time goes by, students will expect a higher level of quality and proficiency with online instruction and support than what they originally accepted during the rapid emergency transition to remote operations.

Resources will also need to shift dramatically. The pandemic has amplified the basic needs of our students; from technology to physical/mental health, food and housing, etc. Institutional investments in technology and professional development will be necessary to ensure ARC is equipped to provide all students with a high-quality, personal learning experience, and mitigate the impact to our already, most disadvantaged students. Facility reconfiguration, safety measures, operational retooling, state budget reductions, and other factors will all necessitate changes from past practice and resource reallocation.



The pendulum swings back and forth throughout each semester as conditions change, the economy reopens, and/or the virus resurfaces.

DISCOVERIES FROM SPRING 2020

The unexpected trials of the spring semester helped us realize what can be accomplished under unusual conditions and discover just how quickly the impossible becomes plausible. A few observations:

- Barriers to working and learning are amplified as a result of the pandemic for those historically underserved and economically disadvantaged. Mitigating this impact requires a significant and intentional examination of the consequences associated with our planning and budget decisions.
- Questioning our own long-held assumptions about how we approach our work is important and healthy.
- Creative solution-finding to longstanding institutional barriers can be achieved in a short period of time.
- Collaboration and significant economies-of-scale can be enhanced in a virtual environment (e.g., across departments, divisions, and colleges)

Philosophically we learned that uncertainty need not result in immobility, and that the significant budget constraints we face must prompt reinvention rather than simply reducing existing budgets that are based on an outdated status quo.

DETERMINING OUR DESTINY

This is the moment to harness our collective wisdom, contend with challenging questions, and creatively innovate the future to create a more resilient and equitable organization. It is the time to question our self-limiting assumptions about what is/is not possible and suspend binary thinking ... it's not about being open or closed, on-ground or online. The fundamental challenge is to extend ARC's ongoing redesign to create an organizational model that can readily adapt to any circumstance while also ensuring that students and employees have access to what they need to effectively learn and work.

[Goldie Blumenstyk](#), senior writer for the Chronicle of Higher Education contends that "Agility, flexibility, and resiliency aren't just crucial skills for 21st-century students. They're also vital skills for 21st-century institutions — especially in an era when disruptive superbugs and superstorms are predicted to become all the more common. colleges that can develop more of the pedagogical and administrative muscles to operate as distributed organizations will probably be stronger for it."

So how might ARC develop to thrive within this new normal? We have a unique opportunity to craft a college and district comprised of elastic platforms that can flex, bend, and adapt in response to what is happening around us as well as what is happening to members of our own community. It is taking personalization to a new level by ensuring a universal design that works equitably for all students and employees. It is working to eliminate the forced choice between campus and home, in-person or online so that everyone has a wealth of viable options. This is our challenge ... to rewrite the rules by applying the principles of elastic design.

While it is unlikely that the future can be accurately predicted, it is possible to prepare for the journey and position American River College to thrive. It is also possible to dream about what could be and influence the future by exploring new opportunities that capitalize upon the shifting landscape.

(ARC Educational Master Plan, p.3)

BASIC TENETS OF ELASTIC DESIGN

Elastic design creates a configuration that is adaptable and effective regardless of geographic location or proximity. Components are neither online or on-ground, on- or off-campus, but both. It is extremely flexible to respond to changing environmental conditions (e.g., fires/smoke, pandemics, etc.) as well as applying practical solutions to the unique needs of programs and individuals.

Rather than being held hostage by uncertainty, elastic design embraces ambiguity to create malleable platforms that remain viable regardless of whether the campus is open, closed, or partially available. It ensures that employees and students who temporarily or permanently lack sufficient resources at home can utilize college resources to bridge the gap. These constructs are grounded in equity-minded teaching, learning, and service while also having the agility to adjust in real-time.

The elasticity test is whether the platform (i.e., service, process, system, etc.) is fully accessible, scalable across colleges, and functional in any of these five scenarios:

- Student is **off-campus** and employee is **on-campus**
- Student is **on-campus** and employee is **off-campus**
- Student and employee are **both on-campus**
- Student and employee are **both off-campus**
- Simultaneous combinations of employee and multiple students that change **hour by hour, day by day, or week by week**



EXAMPLES OF ELASTIC PLATFORM OPPORTUNITIES

Higher education institutions, including ARC, are already delving into elastic design but it has never been attempted at full scale across an entire college. Each component is designed independently, yet makes up a highly elastic whole. Some possible examples include:

Academic and Student Support Services

The remote delivery of all advising and tutoring services this spring illustrates the tenets of elastic design. Further refined, these and other service-delivery platforms could meet the above test of elasticity and serve as a truly dynamic and agile mode of delivery. With elastic design, support services would be accessible both in-person and virtually, supported by employees working both on- and off-campus. Further, on-campus employees would move seamlessly between in-person and virtual engagements/interactions in serving students regardless of the student's location (on-campus, home, another educational center, etc.), with additional support provided by colleagues working exclusively from remote locations.

HomeBase Pathway Communities

With the initial HomeBase implementation now rolling out virtually, what if we designed these community support centers in a way that integrates and personalizes the experience in alignment with the above tests of elasticity so as to operate them simultaneously, both on-campus and virtually?

Virtual Computer Labs

What if we virtualized our instructional computer labs so students could access needed software programs from their laptop or Chromebook from anywhere, 24/7? What if some of these labs were [already a reality](#)?

Flexible Course Design & Delivery

Another practical example of how this type of flexibility has been accomplished at other institutions is the HyFlex instructional model. According to an [EDUCAUSE article](#) (2010), “HyFlex is a course design model that presents the components of hybrid learning in a flexible course structure that gives students the option of attending sessions in the classroom, participating online, or doing both. Students can change their mode of attendance weekly or by topic, according to need or preference.” In this model, students are provided access to both the virtual and physical classrooms by offering multiple paths through the curriculum that can be interchanged based on a student’s life circumstances and individual learning considerations. Indications from a [program](#) conducted between 2014-2017 found that students in this model had comparable success rates and high satisfaction rates to students in traditional online and face-to-face courses.

Front Counter Operations (Admissions, Financial Aid, Business Services, etc.)

What if service counter interactions were facilitated through a technology interface, where paper is eliminated or immediately converted to a digital format. In tandem with the creation of service kiosks, such a design could enable in-person students to access self-service options as well as receive services from virtual employees, or in the more traditional in-person format, from front-counter employees. Ideally, the kiosks would be available at a variety of locations allowing multiple offices to provide services through the same kiosk. Additionally, what if we converted all existing paper-based processes to electronic forms with automated workflows that not only create efficiencies, but track processing to create transparency for students and employees?

NEXT STEPS

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., said “A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.” The forced experiment of remote operations has and will continue to stretch us and our assumptions about what is possible. The principle of elastic design provides an important framework for us to consider in reimagining ourselves as we strive to create more equitable access to educational opportunities for our students and community. What do you have to add to the conversation?