

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

5 Questions to Help You Develop Your Remote-Work Policy — for Now

The decisions you make about work options do not need to be permanent, but they do need to be thoughtful.

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AUGUST 9, 2021



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This essay is excerpted from a new Chronicle special report, “The New Academic Workplace,” [available in the Chronicle Store](#).

In a recent conversation, a higher-education leader noted that planning for post-pandemic life seems far more difficult than navigating the early days of the coronavirus: “Fifteen months ago, we had no choice about where most of our people would work. Now we have multiple options — and that makes everything harder.” That’s a common observation among senior administrators who are trying to return to a “normal” campus experience this fall, beside faculty and staff members who have little to no interest in [returning to “normal” ways](#) of working.

Not wanting to go back to those old ways makes sense. During our global work-from-home experiment, many people enjoyed improved focus, less time commuting, reduced office drama, more-flexible schedules for work and life responsibilities, and

lower out-of-pocket costs for things like transportation, clothing, coffee, and lunch. For some, though certainly not all, work-from-home options increased morale and [productivity](#).

To certain administrators, however, those benefits have been less obvious or compelling. Some leaders want all their people back on the campus and have been seeking reliable advice about how to make that happen. Other leaders recognize that fully remote or hybrid options are inevitable, and are requesting guidance about how to make decisions that meet both individual and organizational needs.

For many higher-education leaders, the Apple chief executive Tim Cook's [hybrid-work announcement](#) in early June came as a huge relief. It signaled that even progressive companies would be putting limits on remote work, and the Apple plan offered a thoughtful approach that organizations in all sectors could emulate. But then [Apple employees pushed back](#) — writing in a formal letter that they “felt not just unheard, but at times actively ignored.”

So where does that leave academe?

It leaves every campus in the position of needing to create its own path forward and to acknowledge that there are risks associated both with being cautious and with being bold. Cautious institutions that require everyone to return to the campus may face mass resignations from employees who want greater workplace flexibility, while bold institutions that offer fully remote options may eventually discover that their good intentions have damaged the sense of community that made their institutions attractive and successful.

Unfortunately, there is no This Is the Way to Do It Guidebook with all the answers. Fortunately, the pandemic taught us that we can move swiftly with incomplete data and that decisions do not have to be permanent. The last year or so taught us all a lot about alternative ways of working, and the coming academic year will certainly teach

us even more. In some cases, it is best to make a decision today and then make a different one tomorrow if better information becomes available. So rather than lock into final policies and forever decisions now, colleges and universities might do better to announce pilot efforts. With yet another year of experience in 2021-22, a more-permanent approach to remote work on your campus may reveal itself.

While the next set of decisions you and your colleagues make about work options do not need to be permanent, they do need to be thoughtful. Here are five questions to help you consider how to move forward:

No. 1: What Do Your Organizational Values Suggest That You Do?

Rather than focus on the mechanics and legalities of working from home, start conversations at a more strategic level. Frame questions around your institution's published organizational values:

- If innovation is an important value, which remote-work options will generate the most novel ideas?
- If inclusion is a value, which analysis and decision-making approaches will honor your commitment to hearing everyone's voice?
- If diversity is a value, which work options will position you to attract faculty and staff members who are diverse in multiple ways?
- If collaboration is a value, which work options will facilitate working together?
- If fairness is a value, how should decisions be made regarding remote versus on-site work?

No. 2: How Are Issues of Trust Affecting Campus Decision Making?

"How can I trust people to work when I can't see them?" has emerged as a key question during many remote-work conversations. In a recent [Twitter conversation](#) on this topic, Carrie Shumaker, chief information officer at the University of Michigan

at Dearborn, made an important observation: “For IT staff, we trust them to work on Thanksgiving when [production] is down. We trust them to work at midnight when they do patching. We trust them to work at 4 a.m. on a Sunday during the network-maintenance window. But somehow we wonder whether they can be trusted to work remotely M-F?”

As an organizational-management consultant who works remotely all the time, I can attest that it is not hard to tell who is doing work and who is not. In fact, it’s fairly easy as long as performance objectives are clear, work tasks are well defined, and administrators are engaged in regular and meaningful conversations with the people they oversee. While ineffective managers believe in hovering, micromanagement, and seat time, strategic managers know that physical presence and the appearance of being busy are no substitute for *actual* productivity.

To those who think constant and direct observation of someone’s work is critical, two related questions are worth considering:

- If employees are not trustworthy, why are they still employees?
- If managers have employees who cannot be trusted, why are they still managers?

No. 3: How Do You Ensure Fairness in Determining Who Works From Home?

Some higher-education leaders want everyone to come back to the campus because deciding who gets to work remotely — and who doesn’t — seems too complicated, political, and divisive. “If some people need to be on-site, everyone should be on site,” they explain. But as [one Twitter user](#) retorted: “Not everyone has private offices, so no one should have them.” That tweet is true, of course: Institutions did not treat all administrators and faculty and staff members the same before the pandemic, and uniform approaches after the pandemic seem impractical. That said, it is essential to use an equitable and consistent process to make work-location and work-schedule decisions.

When my fellow organizational consultants and I work with colleges and universities, we suggest that they evaluate all of their positions (not their people) and put them into one of three primary buckets: fully on-site-required, hybrid-capable, and fully remote-capable. Once a position is determined to be hybrid-capable or fully remote-capable, there can be additional assessment steps based on specific role and work-unit requirements. Yes, conducting a comprehensive review of all positions will be time consuming, but it will help you make defensible work-location decisions.

Once you've determined who must be on-site and who can work remotely (at whatever distance from the campus and however many days a week), other questions will probably emerge:

- Should you subsidize parking or commuting costs for those who have to travel to work?
- Should you cover high-speed internet access for roles designated as fully remote?
- Will remote employees get office supplies and second monitors, or should those be reserved for people working on the campus?
- Should employees who request a hybrid option give up their designated office space?
- How do you create a sense of community among those who work on-site and off-site?

No. 4: Do You Have the Infrastructure Necessary to Support Remote Work?

There is more to developing a remote-work strategy than deciding whether people are expected to be on or off camera during Zoom meetings. Infrastructure issues are mostly related to the institution's ability to conduct business. When your remote employees are located outside of your immediate geographic area — hours away and even in different states and countries — there are benefits and compensation issues to consider, process and system issues to navigate, and multiple compliance matters to resolve. Here are just a few of them:

Compliance issues. The United States, and indeed the world, is a patchwork of employment laws and taxation policies. California residents cannot be subject to a “[use it or lose it](#)” policy for paid time off. New York residents are eligible for [12 weeks of paid parental leave](#). Mexico does not recognize “at-will employment” and requires substantial [severance](#), should employment be terminated.

To protect your institution, it’s essential to know the employment laws and taxation requirements of every employee’s work location. Many institutions are opting to outsource the research on registration requirements and the policy revisions associated with long-term remote-work options, rather than attempt that work internally. Colleges are also exploring outsourced options for benefits and payroll services to ensure compliance with wage, leave, and taxation requirements.

Benefits issues. I know of one university that has long taken pride in offering affordable and accessible health care via its academic-medicine enterprise. Employees who live near the campus value the program, but it is not a viable option for those (including many information-technology professionals) who live well outside the city limits. Those staff members have come to understand that their health-insurance benefits are worth far less than the medical care offered on the campus, and are now demanding new options.

Benefits parity for geographically dispersed employees is quickly emerging as an urgent issue. Revising health- and dental-insurance plans is not a simple activity, but will be important if colleges and universities want to attract and retain strong talent outside their immediate region. In addition to evaluating health-insurance plans for employees working from home at varying distances from the campus, other benefits issues require thoughtful consideration:

- Should employee-assistance programs serve employees in other cities, states, or countries?

- What about on-site child care and access to the campus recreation center? Should stipends be provided to employees who cannot use those services because of their location?
- If employees in one state are legally entitled to paid leave that is more than what an institution currently offers, should all employees be given more-generous options?

Compensation issues. Imagine a college or university in Omaha is trying to recruit a graphic designer who can work remotely. At the end of your search process, everyone agrees that the candidate from Boston is the clear choice. While the going rate for such a position might be \$41,000 in Omaha, national salary data reveal that it is \$52,000 in Boston. Should the candidate be offered the going rate in Omaha or in Boston? Institutions can go either way, but consistency in approach for all remote employees will be essential.

Process and systems issues. Do your institution's processes make it possible to actually accomplish key tasks off-site? Colleges with robust technology systems, cloud-based document-management options, and electronic-signature protocols adapted quickly to enforced remote work. Those that still rely on paper documents, in-person signatures, and protocols cataloged only in a few people's heads have struggled during the last many months.

No. 5: What Are You Missing in Focusing on Work-From-Home Policies?

It's possible that your institution, by fixating on where people do their work, is ignoring a more fundamental question: "What will it take to attract and retain diverse, high-performing people?" Shifting to that question will yield a more inclusive culture, better colleagues, more innovative benefits and compensation options, transparent career paths, and, of course, flexible work options.

Flexible work options should not be limited to whether someone works from home a few days a week or entirely. The options could also include:

- Flexible work hours. Not everyone works best during traditional business hours.
- Part-time employment to varying degrees.
- Compressed workweeks. That could mean consolidating five days of work into four or 10 days into nine.
- Paid or unpaid mini-sabbaticals.

The goal is to offer a workplace experience that is flexible, energizing, and inspiring. Talented people have options, and they will choose organizations that make it possible for them to have both meaningful jobs and meaningful lives. Colleges and universities that want exceptional faculty and staff members will need to give strategic attention to the quality of their work experience.

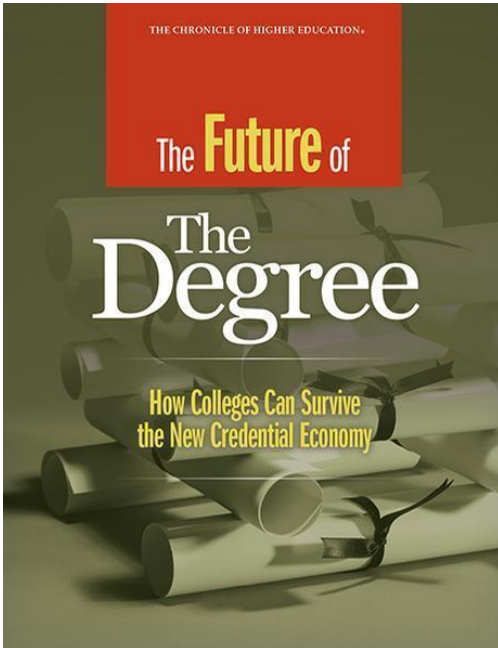
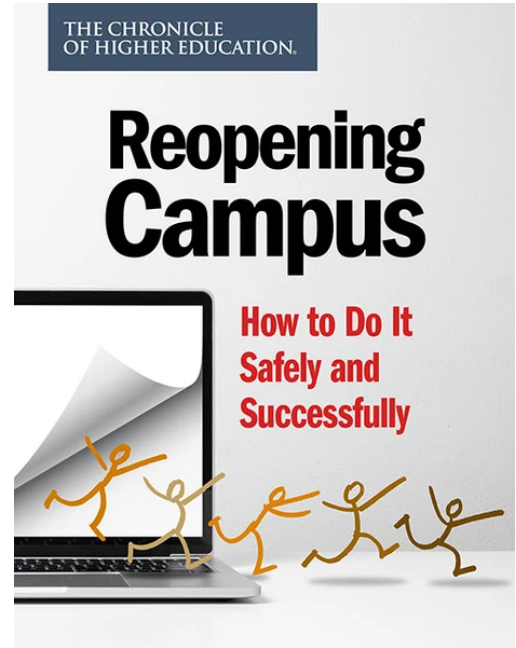
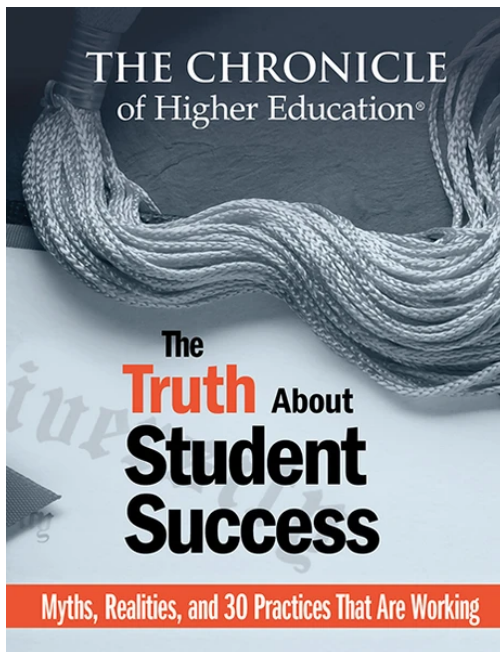
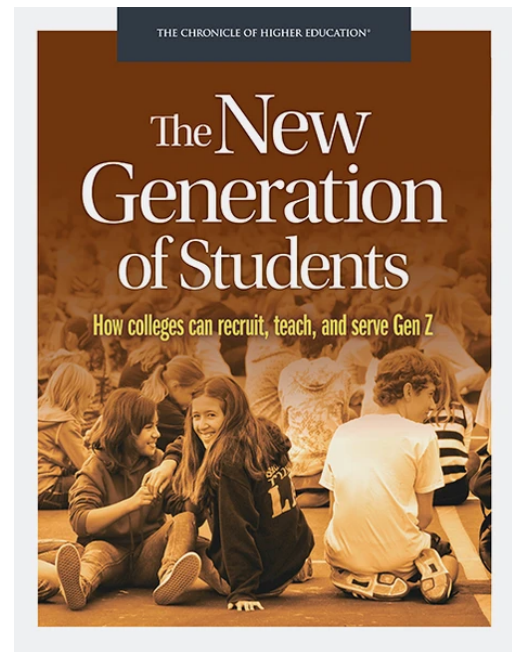
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