TRANSCRIPT: Podcast – Alumni help lead universities through the pandemic

Host: Hello. I'm Heather Gessino-Kraft, with McKinsey's Alumni Relations team. It's the time of year in many parts of the world when university students are making preparations to return to classes. However, COVID-19 has made that return far from routine. To find out how different academic institutions are approaching the return, we spoke with three alumni in senior roles at universities around the world: Eric Labaye, President of L'Ecole Polytechnique in Paris; Rufus Black, President of the University of Tasmania; and Erin Hoffman Harding, Vice President for Student Affairs at Indiana's University of Notre Dame.

They spoke to us about how the pandemic has affected their schools, their plans for the return to classes, how they're thinking about the physical and mental well-being of faculty, students and staff, and what changes to higher education they believe may last beyond COVID-19.

How COVID-19 has affected university life

I started by asking Eric, Rufus, and Erin to share their experiences of the immediate changes caused by the virus – from switching to online classes, to bringing back study-abroad students, to providing knowledge and expertise to their communities as a whole. You'll hear Erin first, followed by Eric, and then Rufus.

Erin Hoffman Harding: At Notre Dame we began tracking the virus in January with the start of our spring semester, with some of our international students returning to us, and most of the impact began internationally. So what happened is we first brought back our study-abroad students. We have a pretty substantial program in Rome. That's the moment for me when the world began to change.

I was writing letters and notifying students and parents with a colleague of mine, and then over the next week and a half we had brought all of our study-abroad students home, we had announced we were in Spring Break with our domestic students on campus, and we thought initially that we would be closed until mid-April. And again, within another week, we had converted the rest of the semester to remote instruction, closed our residence halls, and were caring for those students who weren't able to return home for one reason or another – either international travel, or because home wasn't a safe place for them to be. But never in my now 16-year career since I left the Firm have I seen such a radical impact on higher ed.

Eric Labaye: Like many other universities, and particularly in France, we had to shut down L'Ecole Polytechnique in mid-March following the President's decision to lock down the country. So for several months we had basically no students on campus. So we had to shift both education as well as administration to a more digital mode, and this in fact happened in a very effective way thanks to the mobilization of all administrative support and all the professors. In fact in a week we moved hundreds of classes digital.

I would add also that during the lockdown L'Ecole Polytechnique was also at the forefront of helping the country both in the labs – we had 20 to 25 projects that were basically providing solutions so at least elements to fight the disease; some math models to understand the pandemic, we also had some of the economic labs that were also working on testing; some

others on the physics side were working on nanoparticles. We also had huge engagement from our students. Some of them are military officials, and they went back to their units to provide help at night and during the weekend in the firefighter units, for example. And some others also provided support to youngsters who were not going to class – such as the kids of healthcare workers and military officials – and they were basically supporting them digitally in their work.

Rufus Black: The impact on us in the first half of the year was modest, because we were able to continue to deliver online and internationally, and when we went into lockdown for a period of a couple of months, we were able to continue to deliver online. We were able to flip from on-campus to online delivery very successfully. And because we were able to suppress the virus very effectively, we were able, by the end of the semester, to still enable students who needed to complete in-person activities – some of our doctors, nurses, others who were in training – to complete some of their in-person requirements.

The second semester, a very different kind of picture. Australia has continued to have its borders tightly closed, and restricted the number of flights and the number of people into the country, and that means really no international students coming into the country. On the flip side, as we get into these types of periods, we've had a strong surge and interest domestically in coming to the university. We put out a lot of additional courses and programs designed to support people through the lockdown period, and through reskillings and retrainings, so that when the economy opens up more, people have got new sets of jobs and skills. We provided the backbone of the epidemiological work that was involved in suppressing the virus. Thirty of our staff transferred to the state to lead and support that effort, so quite a range of ways from printing PPE through our engineering facilities when the state was short on that early on when we were chasing the virus hard, through to providing facilities for the government to do quarantining. When you're a single university serving a whole population you end up being a real partner to government as you tackle crises like these.

These are times when you're in partnerships with your communities helping everybody to get through and to engage in the recovery on the other side.

Handling the return to classes: Virtual, in-person, or both?

Host: Rufus and Eric talked about how their universities have taken a mixed approach to instruction, with teaching remaining mostly online but with some limited in-person engagement.

Rufus: Because we continue to have restrictions in place – fairly standard one-and-a-half-meter restrictions – that's basically meant we can't return to lectures. Lecture theatres, when you measure them at that kind of rate, don't fit terribly many people—so we're continuing to deliver lectures online, but everything else we can we've been able to get back to campus with COVID-safe practices: laboratories with appropriate separation; practicals; medical, health, science students able to do in-person things with PPE. So really a lot of those activities we've been able to now return to in this half of the year.

As students return, everybody does a health check every morning coming onto campus – staff and students – so we check their temperature and log in. That logging in means we know where everybody is. We have a well-rehearsed outbreak management plan, so if we get a positive

identification of somebody, staff or a student, we triangulate all our electronic data and where people are at so within the first hour of notification we can have a full picture of all the contacts that person has had in the course of their engagement at the university within their likely infection period, and have notifications to everybody involved to take immediate quarantine measures until we've firmed up their level of risk.

We've had on-campus living right through this period, including through the lockdown, and we've put strict protocols in place in all of those campus living environments, and we haven't had a single case of transmission between any of our community members. But in the early days of this we did have some students come inbound who were COVID positive, and we managed to successfully quarantine them with no further transmission; they recovered well. We learnt a lot from getting those plans really working and so they're now well rehearsed, and our staff are well rehearsed, and they all have appropriate PPE if they've got to deal with suspected cases to keep them safe as they manage that.

Eric: So for the new academic year, we are taking a hybrid approach, as I think many universities are. We still have a few uncertainties regarding the sanitary conditions, but we have already decided, for example, to have no big amphitheater with hundreds of students in the room. This will stay digital. But we are keeping basically the small group interactions in-person, and professors interacting with the students. This will be the rule and we'll adapt as we go through September, October, and November, depending on the environment.

Host: Erin's institution, the University of Notre Dame, has taken a different tack. As Erin explains, the university is returning to mainly in-person classes, with an accommodations process for any students who wish to study remotely.

Erin: We are bringing all of our students back in person this fall, with a variety of measures in place. We, like many other institutions, have been consulting medial and scientific experts, making significant changes to our classroom environments and as well to our residential environments given the nature of our campus.

The university has adopted four practices that we are repeating to our students, faculty and staff – more than perhaps they would like – but we're seeing great adherence so far. First and foremost, we have universal mask-wearing indoors, whether that is in a residence hall environment or a classroom. We're also asking folks to wear masks outside unless they're able to physically distance. Measure number two is around distancing. We have rearranged whether it is residence hall common space, whether it is our student centers or our classrooms, that six feet of distancing to minimize close contact between members of our campus community. Third one – and this is good beyond our COVID pandemic world – is washing our hands. We have sanitizer available everywhere – we gave each and every student refillable hand-sanitizer bottles – and have those available in the residence hall communities and are encouraging them to sanitize, or ideally wash, their hands as frequently as possible. The fourth measure is that we have implemented for all campus community members a daily health screen. We provided thermometers to all of our students for that daily health check, and we have a whole new team that has been hired at the university to run our own testing clinic on campus, as well as to do our own contact tracing in collaboration with the county and the state, that we think will allow us to be as safe and as healthy as possible this fall.

Balancing the needs of students and staff with different health risk profiles

Host: But what about the different risk profiles among students and staff? How to balance different vulnerabilities and needs? Here's Rufus and Erin.

Rufus: Early on we got any staff who were themselves in more vulnerable categories, or had family members who were in vulnerable categories, and we got them working remotely quickly to protect them, and they continue to have the option to stay working remotely. Given that for our students we've been able to deliver so much online, that's given students with any particular vulnerabilities the ability to keep their learning going. We're very supportive of that. Where we are with returning to class: If students are concerned, we've connected with them to have alternative assessments to avoid them having any serious exposure. But as I say, the first couple of months we haven't had any community transmission, so the risk profile for everybody has come down a very long way.

Erin: This is something that actually comes quite naturally to a place like Notre Dame. We are a faith-based institution, and so a sense of community on our campus is something we're very proud of in a regular year, and something we've really been calling on from a mission perspective to ask of our students, faculty and staff. This is about caring for the health of each individual, and most importantly caring for the health of our entire community. The measures we put in place are designed for the safety of all, but particularly to our students who by and large are young people. We are asking them to adhere to these measures to care for those who might be more vulnerable among us.

We of course, for faculty, staff, and students, have had accommodations made for those who might have a particularly higher risk profile so that we can ensure that they, too, are as safe as possible. But I would say the calling, and the ask of everyone, is to take these actions to care for one another.

We're really hopeful. It's a very unique time, and really challenging, but I think, at least as we've seen in our students – and we did some summer surveying – they want so desperately to be here, and to be among one another, that we're really giving them an opportunity to live up to their best selves.

Caring for the mental health of students, faculty, and staff

Host: Mental health support was also important to all three of the schools.

Erin: We've actually done some assessment, and it happens to be part of my responsibility at the university, to oversee both the physical health of our students in terms of our primary care practice, but also in terms of our mental health services. And so over the summer we asked our students in particular what they needed, what had been their experience – I would say both pandemic-related, but also the economic devastation, and the rightful focus on racial injustice, particularly in the United States.

That gave us a good sense of how our students were returning to us, and what services and support we could put in place. We've learned some new things around teletherapy, where we can add availability of experts to our students, but also we're being attentive to the needs of faculty and staff.

At the University of Notre Dame we have a cross-faculty, -staff, and -student task force really thinking intentionally about emotional well-being and how we can foster that sense of care and concern for one another as we walk together through this fall.

Eric: We have a military component in our school, so we have a medical service which is pretty strong, and so we relied on this to ensure that everybody was doing fine, both in terms of health first ensuring, vis-à-vis the COVID pandemic, that things were going okay, and if people were feeling badly, how to get them supported.

The second element, we have an entire group of several psychologists, and they were active reaching out to people who were identified as being, I would say, a bit lost or not otherwise well connected. So here we had a very good network effect both for students and for the staff.

Rufus: Going into it with rising anxiety, obviously, we increased the availability of counseling staff for people, so there was literally more support available. We created a series of resources for all staff and students to be able to access for managing the inevitable challenges of operating in more isolated environments, and a higher anxiety environment, so there was a good series of tools they could take to support their own mental health and well-being. We upped the number of people who had mental health First Aid training, particularly those who are dealing more directly in our student communities, to support them to be able to deal with that front-line triaging of issues and challenges as we saw them to make sure we had a broader net of support.

And then we gave all of our leaders a fair bit of coaching and advice around how to support their teams, and to be setting up the right kind of support. Even things like getting a gym crew – obviously we couldn't run gyms anymore – running online gym classes, so people could Zoom in. Just in terms of doing all of those things to maintain well-being through a time like this, recognizing that the physical is important for the mental. So aiming to support that and keep social connectivity going.

Host: Rufus also talked about how one of the University of Tasmania's specific areas of expertise was able to play a particularly helpful role in acclimating people who are coming out of lockdown.

Rufus: One of the areas of expertise we have as a university is operating in extreme environments, because we support a large Antarctic program, and also operating in remote and extreme wilderness environments. We're used to supporting people coming out of long periods of isolation. So our psychologists who do that, the one who leads that work, produced terrific material to help people with the journey out of isolation, which is quite a psychological journey of reconnection. We got her working with our broad leadership group, our top 150 leaders, briefing them to support their staff coming out of it, and then she created a series of tools for all staff to be able to use to manage their own journey of coming out of that quite unique experience that people had gone through. I think that's been really important for helping people understand what 'normal' is when you come out of those kind of settings and how to manage yourself as you do. Those are resources we provided to the broader community as well, as the whole community

has been on that journey of coming out of the lockdown world.

Potentially permanent shifts and changes to higher education

Host: All three also thought that there would be some permanent shifts or changes to higher education that would last beyond COVID-19, most notably that there has been a quantum leap forward in the integration of online teaching, but they expect some other long-term effects as well.

Erin: Ironically, for me it's reinforced the importance of an in-person, residential education, but I also see great opportunity for change. I've aligned with my team: I said "never waste a good pandemic." So we have used this – in an industry that I think perhaps has not always responded very quickly to change – to change things at a pace that we really haven't done before.

I think when you start to think of the industry as a whole it's going to be much more profound and perhaps accelerated in terms of some macro-level changes. How do small liberal-arts colleges navigate this environment? What will enrollment writ large look like in demand across higher education?

I close in saying I come from a subset that feels affirmed and actually excited about some of the changes that it's prompted on our campus, but daunted, really, I think for the industry as a whole, for what lies ahead in the next year.

Host: Rufus talked about the impact on international students, how many universities may see an expansion of their mission, and how they will likely continue to embrace remote learning.

Rufus: They're shifts rather than complete changes. I think it is going to, for a period, change the dynamics of the international student market, with how students are moving around the world. It'll take quite some time for that to return, and I think as a result we'll see strengthening local education systems, which will just accelerate that process of places like China looking after more of their own students. So I think a long-term trend will be accelerated.

I think for a lot of universities it is also refocusing them on their own communities and on their own social mission in I think really positive and really healthy ways. Around the world, in many places, it's universities that are leading the efforts in searching for vaccines and providing communities with the support they need. That, I think, is a healthy focus for everyone to be reconnected with. And the other thing is that there's no doubt it's rapidly evolved people's integration of online learning into their modes of teaching delivery. What might have taken five or six years to get people skilled up and doing has happened in weeks or months. So I think we'll see an acceleration of the capacity to use blended tools and techniques as part of learning delivery in places where that wasn't happening so much, or wasn't happening at the level we now have. And I think in the operation of universities, clearly it's produced some significant shifts in the capacity to deliver and manage things remotely. Those are some very big gains in terms of connectivity but also efficiency that come together with all of that.

There are shifts around markets, modes of delivery, mission, and how we manage that I think we'll see.

Host: Eric said universities have now seen what is possible with online learning but that there are experiences – such as for international students – that cannot be replicated remotely.

Eric: I think the pandemic will have shown at least one thing, which is that digital can work. We have seen that in maybe an accelerated fashion, in a broader fashion, than we expected. But I think it has changed the mentality and mindset – the mindset regarding what digital can do both on the education side as well as on the administrative side, I think has been huge.

Now the question is going to be 'what do we exactly want?'. We have seen what is possible, now is what do we want. As we see already some classes can move to digital for better interaction. Some of the administration also can increase its impact and experience through digital. But it is clear at the same time that an experience on campus matters a lot. Interacting with professors, interacting with researchers, interacting with your classmates, is also as important.

So I don't believe at all in the disappearance or the idea that presence will not be required. I would say the mix obviously is going to be a bit different, as well as the speed at which things will change, because, as I mentioned, the mindset now of people has been evolving. I think the diversity, the international aspect of the school has to remain, and in fact continue to grow, and this in fact we shouldn't change, and digital will not replace that. So this I think is more a question mark right now that we need to work on, and hopefully things will resume in the right way.

How McKinsey experience influenced the problem-solving approach

Host: Finally, all three shared similar thoughts on how their time at McKinsey had helped them to think through their plans.

Eric: When I was at McKinsey, I had the experience of several crises: the 2000 crisis, and 2008, where I was both leading the Paris Office as well as being on the Shareholders' Council. I would say this experience was extremely helpful in addressing the COVID crisis, because the anticipation, the empowerment of people, an integrated plan, how to quickly get a good direction and a good approach on how to deal with the multiple facets of a crisis – I learned a bit through the McKinsey experience, and our approach to dealing with such things.

Erin: My gratitude to the Firm for a firm and analytical way for thinking about a problem has served me well, not only in these last four months, but really in my fifteen years in higher education. I feel like I've held very many different roles in the institution, but that outside-in look at different constituencies, look at different angles, and most importantly look at the facts that lie before us to solve problems, has always served me really well.

Rufus: There's no doubt my McKinsey life played a really central role in how I approached managing this, and I think to considerable gain. As we went into this, it was the strategy under uncertainty thinking that absolutely governed how we set about doing it. In March we created a really robust set of scenarios and options, built straight out of that kind of thinking, that have proved remarkably resilient, and meant that we've really had a full view of what was happening. Ever since March we've been reliably able to see three to four months – or more – into the future, and our decisions have kept us well ahead of the game.

Host: We hope you found this podcast informative, and we thank you for listening. If you'd like to learn more about how COVID-19 is affecting education as well as many other industries, please visit the COVID Response Center on McKinsey.com.