

Transcription for

**THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED**

P. 49: THE FUTURE OF THE PHYSICAL CAMPUS

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41:14

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Hello, and welcome to the Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and cofounder of Inside Higher Ed. And in today's episode, we're going to discuss one of the many aspects of higher education that was thrown into question by the COVID-19 pandemic, the role and value of the physical campus. Even as most colleges and universities proved over the last 15 months that they could function adequately and often effectively with their people physically dispersed, many students and employees hankered to return. The vast majority of institutions plan to operate this fall more like they did in 2019 than they did a year ago, but that doesn't mean their leaders aren't rethinking how they might use their physical campuses in the years ahead.

Few are confronting the questions as directly as the University of Akron, which announced in February that it would consider selling, repurposing, or otherwise rethinking the use of up to 1 million of the roughly 8 million square feet of buildings and land it owns. COVID-19 didn't start the conversations at Akron, which were driven in part by enrollment and financial pressures. But as is true in many corners of our lives, the pandemic accelerated the University's discussions.

Joining The Key today to discuss the situation at Akron and elsewhere in higher education are Nathan

Mortimer, vice president of operations at Akron, Lander Medlin, executive vice president of APPA: Leadership in Educational Facilities, and Tomas Rossant and Alex O'Briant, who are, respectively, a design partner and a principal at Ennead Architects, which works with colleges across the United States on their design needs.

While this conversation is focused on how colleges and universities might use their campus spaces as their needs and those of their students evolve, it is, like many such discussions around higher education these days, ultimately about the ability and inclination of colleges to adapt to changing circumstances. That's going to be the focus of the next three episodes of The Key, which are sponsored by Wiley Education Services. Before we begin today's episode, here's a quick word from Wiley.

TODD ZIPPER: Hi, I'm Todd Zipper, president of Wiley Education Services. This episode is brought to you by my new podcast, An Educated Guest. Be sure to check it out. I will be bringing together great minds in higher ed to dive deep into the innovations and trends that will guide the future of education and careers. No small talk, just big ideas. Subscribe and listen on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We begin today's program by hearing from Nathan Mortimer, who, as the University of Akron's vice president of operations, is smack dab in the middle of the analysis of its campus space and facilities. Nathan, welcome to The Key, and thanks for joining us.

NATHAN MORTIMER: Yeah, thank you.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Since the University announced plans in February to consider selling, leasing, repurposing up to one eighth of the office space or land it holds, as much as a million square feet, can you tell our listeners what went into the decision?

NATHAN MORTIMER: The University has been doing quite a bit of work around properties for the last three or four years. I will just tell you it's accelerating at little bit starting in February. But in the course of the last three or four years, we've prepared a number of properties for development. We had buildings on them that we were no longer using, so we abated them and remediated them for environmental concerns, and then we green spaced them. So we've done probably 300,000 plus square foot of abating and razing old structures in the last three or four years, just getting the campus ready for what we're doing underway right now.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What are the factors that have led you down that path?

NATHAN MORTIMER: Yeah, really a couple of things. We've had an enrollment challenge here for a number of years, so we're trying to rightsize campus to what we think enrollment is today and what we hope it's going to be, you know, on a growth potential going forward. It was an opportunity in our opinion to take quite a bit of deferred maintenance off the books by doing what we're doing. And quite frankly, it's to bring some different eyes on campus to look at what we're doing and to maybe give us some different perspectives and different views of how we could do things better and differently, and create opportunities for the campus and greater Akron community.

DOUG LEDERMAN: One of the things that's enabled to you to do this is a grant from the Knight Foundation. Is that grant what's going to enable you to bring additional eyes on campus? Is that what you're going to do with that?

NATHAN MORTIMER: That's a great question. So we actually have two processes ongoing right now, and they're sort of in parallel. One is we're looking for what we would call a property consultant/coordinator, and that's what the grant from the Knight Foundation, the generous grant from the Knight Foundation, is going to help fund is to bring somebody in to look at what we've done, to concur with it, offer different ideas, and the like. The other one that we're actually, we have a pretty comprehensive proposal out on the street, or request for proposal, I should say, on the street, looking for a multitude of different properties that we're, to your point, looking to either sell, redevelop it to P3 opportunities and the like, so we're looking for that consultant to help us navigate through all those other properties.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Well, describe if you can, maybe describe what the range of all this space is. Is it land, is it already built facilities? What's the mix?

NATHAN MORTIMER: Yeah, so it's really a... If you were look at it a couple of years ago, it would have been largely buildings. Like I said, we had a number of vacated, unused buildings that we knew ultimately, they weren't really in condition to be repurposed. So we took the initiative effort over the last couple of years to go through and abate those buildings, the environmental remediation that we're talking about, and then actually taking them down and creating green space. So we've done that to roughly six buildings over 300,000 square feet that we think is ready for either selling or redevelopment.

There are some buildings that we've already repurposed. So a couple of examples... We had a vacant building that, the State Highway Patrol in the State of Ohio was looking for a new home back in the county. For whatever reason, they left the county about 12 years ago. They were looking to return to Summit County. We actually had a space. They are a part of the State of Ohio as the University of Akron. So we actually put them in an existing building. So we're the first in the State of Ohio to have a Highway Patrol post on campus. They're not on campus patrolling our campus, but they were looking for a home back in the county. And it gives us a little bit of added value of enhanced security presence, and it found a place for a partner here in the State of Ohio. So not only have we taken some buildings down, we're trying to repurpose some buildings as well.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Akron's hardly alone in having built up its campus a good bit in recent years. Did universities like Akron overbuild their physical campuses or were they responding appropriately to the context at a certain time, and are now responding differently given that there's a new context and landscape?

NATHAN MORTIMER: Yeah, I'm probably in best position to talk just about the University of Akron versus others. But, you know, at the time, the campus was really outdated, and if you'd been on campus 20, 25 years ago, you would witness the road coming through campus. You would witness a lot of old, tired buildings. And so the University made a decision back in the late 90s, early 2000s to renovate campus, and it did do that, in anticipation that enrollment would do different things than what it's done for us the last 10 years.

Really, what we're talking about today is creating a better definition of campus, creating the boundary of campus. The buildings that we're talking about aren't in the middle, in the core of campus. And in some cases, quite frankly, we've got a couple of very, very large buildings that we think there's great opportunities for joint use, meaning bring the community in, bring partners in, that because of the location of the buildings would be not just a great use for the University, but really to have others join us inside those buildings.

DOUG LEDERMAN: How, if at all, did the pandemic affect your thinking about this? We've had lots of conversations about whether the various changes wrought by the pandemic in terms of more comfort, I think, more comfortableness with people working remotely, potentially with students learning remotely. How much did the changes and the sort of environment brought about by COVID-19 affect this process and the University's thinking?

NATHAN MORTIMER: Great question. I would tell you some. I think that the further away that we get into the pandemic and emerge to the new norm, I think we'll have a real better perception or realization of what the pandemic meant in terms of workplace environment and remote learning, and the like. So I think we're still a little bit too close to the pandemic to know where it's going to end up. I think if you reflect back from five years and look back, you'll have a better perspective. You know, we were under way, doing a lot of things with buildings and properties, and space utilization before the pandemic. I think we're just going to be a little more intentional as we navigate through the pandemic looking to see what the academic program's going to look like, and certainly going to take that into consideration as we do, as we're about ready to do.

DOUG LEDERMAN: How much is this a contraction of the physical campus at Akron versus a realignment with what the University's priorities are at this moment and ideally, ahead?

NATHAN MORTIMER: Yeah, I think it's a couple of things. You know, it's really about trying to rightsize the footprint of campus to get with what we think we need, and what the future holds, knowing that the pandemic and how we emerge from that, and the new norm, could impact us even more. But a lot of it is just creating opportunities to clear some properties up. Really, what we're talking about largely is nonacademic buildings. In fact, we're making some investments. We've got a really large investment we're getting ready to start making this summer in the core of campus. We have two existing very important academic buildings that are very dated, and so we're getting ready to take one of those down and fully renovate the other building, and put a small addition on. We're really not talking just about contraction, we're talking about trying to do the right investments. You know, do certainly contractions, but also being, recognize the importance of investing in the academic program as well.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Is there... What are the finances of all this likely to look like? Obviously, the University, in part because of a sizable decrease in enrollment has had to make a bunch of difficult decisions around other parts of the University budget, staffing, and some other things. Does the reassessment of the physical footprint, will it change the financial picture enough that other cuts might not be necessary? I mean, I'm curious how it fits in to the sort of overall financial state of the institution.

NATHAN MORTIMER: Yeah, I'll be able to answer your question more fully in about seven months when we're through the process. But, you know, our belief is that, and time will tell, that we think there's an opportunity to bring in the right partners to do some investments, to look at things a little differently from what we have, to be a little bit more maybe entrepreneurial than what we have done thus far. And at the same point, really, beyond that, it's about rightsizing, and then I think I

mentioned the deferred maintenance item that we talked about that's on the books, which is really a cost-avoidance down the road.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Tell us a little more about how Akron is thinking about the role of the physical campus going forward, and what do you think other institutions might draw from the conversations that are going on there?

NATHAN MORTIMER: And I think the pandemic is going to lead to higher education, and, quite frankly, the private sector as well, into the same conversation. You know, higher ed in our opinion, at least at this point, is that we're not just bricks and mortar. It is a place, it's a living place, and the living-learning experience the students have being on campus we think is hugely important. Remote learning, I think, is going to have a new place, whether it's, you know, fully online or a hybrid or the like, but, you know, if you really get into the essence of a university, it is a place and it is a living being. And we think that having that place for students to come, live, and learn, and grow is important.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So it's not a diminution of the importance of campus, it's making sure that the campus is the rightsize and has the right elements of it to continue to fill that mission at a time when some things are in play in terms, and potentially changing.

NATHAN MORTIMER: That's right. I think you say it well. You know, there is a lot of fluidity out there right now, but we do believe that whether we're talking 10 years ago, today, or into the future, we believe that physical environment of a campus is important to student learning and success.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Nathan Mortimer, thanks for being here. I appreciate your time.

NATHAN MORTIMER: Thank you. Have a great day.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Our next guest is Lander Medlin, executive vice president at APPA, the main association of educational facilities professionals. Lander, welcome to The Key, and thanks for being here.

LANDER MEDLIN: Thank you so much, Doug. I really appreciate the opportunity. This is my favorite topic, so let's talk about it.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Great. So we just spoke with Nathan Mortimer at the University of Akron about their plan to rethink how they use about an eighth of their campus footprint. And I'm curious how what Akron is doing fits into the larger national landscape that you look at in your job, and how representative it is of conversations that you're aware of.

LANDER MEDLIN: What I'm hearing from other campuses across the country is they need to meaningfully downsize, rightsize their physical campus. I mean, we know the data. We've looked at the data. The data is not pretty when it comes to being able to support a drop in revenues, net revenues, a drop in enrollment, which we can talk about in a little bit, what are those. But also, the increase in actual need to repair, and maintain, and replace these facilities, that's increasing... You know, the last time I looked, just like humans, buildings age, utilities infrastructure age, right? They're all aging, so they're on a decaying line, but we do need to keep up with our investments around that. And we've not done that, unfortunately, in the main. And so we have an increasing need. That's the only line that's going up when I look at graphs, the only line that's going up. And that's really important for us to understand. And as I look at where we are right now, Doug, that this actually can be an exciting time because these issues existed pre-pandemic, right? They've been revealed and they've been accelerated by COVID. In the scale of disruption, that even Scott Galloway talks about, and the impact of technologies, we have real opportunities, and I think Akron is an example of that. I want to see more and more institutions taking advantage of these. They've got to do it, they've got to do it.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So it may be too early to tell, but what is your sense of how the pandemic influenced the thinking of your members and of college leaders about their physical space? I've seen it argued both that it increased the value of the physical campus and that it revealed the campuses to be less important. How do you think most college officials that you talk to are thinking about it?

LANDER MEDLIN: So I think we have some advantages here with this. The remote hybrid workplace and the remote hybrid learning is going to give us some advantages to utilize both the remote for those individuals who want to stay that way. Okay, that could be good. We've got global competition for those. We can go after them, right? Then we have the idea of place-based institutions, and how important it is. Two-thirds to three-quarters of the students said they wanted to come back, even in the midst of last fall, okay, the pandemic. And their parents drove them all the way across the country to get there, too, okay, so that's an interesting...



But the college experience is still something that people strive for and that they want to have. That means, in my head, place matters. You know, what does the place look like? If I was stuck in my dorm room, was my dorm room attractive enough to want to keep me there, or was it a bit of a nightmare?

So I think that institutions are looking about, and I'm going to say it like this, Doug, being more intentional about their sense of place, right? That's going to be really important as we move forward. And that's going to drive being more intentional and disciplined about what spaces we want to keep. Gosh, we don't want to demolish anything, do we? We don't want to get rid of space. But we are overbuilt. We have too much space I think.

But place does matter, and I think it's going to continue to matter. I just think it's how do we consider our own competitive advantage by institution, and how do we consider utilizing that as the differentiator for who is our audience. What is our risk tolerance? How do we go at the spaces that are no longer attractive to the communities that we're trying to bring in? So I'll give you a perfect example, and that's large lecture halls. Are people going to build large lecture halls after the remote synchronous-asynchronous delivery? I don't think so. And so now what do we do with those things? And how do we move forward very differently with smaller sort of learning pods, right? So I think that's helping, that should help us think about this stuff, Doug.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We're talking with Lander Medlin, executive vice president of APPA: Leadership in Educational Facilities. What you just said made it sound like this is very much an institutionally focused equation or set of questions. So what kinds of questions do you advise institutions to be asking, and what kind of analysis should they be doing to assess whether they've got the right physical footprint, the right mix of space and facilities for where they are now and for where they're heading? What is that equation or... What does that analysis look like?

LANDER MEDLIN: So I think part of this is stepping way back and thinking about my institution, what differentiates my institution from everyone else? You know, we have a tendency, you and I do this all the time, well, they're research conducts, they're liberal arts, they're master degree granting, whatever. But they're all, they are unique. That's the one thing I will give every institution is its uniqueness. But how do they use that to advantage? So what is their competitive advantage, given those differentiations? And now, if I know that is programmatically and academically, then I know where I want to head in terms of my population of students and faculty.

And it also helps drive programmatic space. Not all space is equal, Doug. And so where are the biggest

drivers for my using space for enrollment, recruitment, and retention? And how do I use that to make forced, this is going to be really hard for people, disciplined decisions around, let's call it a net zero space policy. I know, scary to people. How do I actually think about I am not going to add space. We are going to make conscious decisions about either reducing our space portfolio, or that we're going to be very targeted about what space we're going to use.

I think there's another aspect to this too is, what is the relative risk and reliability of spaces? You know, there's a good question to ask around, is the space good or is the space great for my purpose? That's really important, and that means I have to be very disciplined with the entirety of the community of looking at integrated space planning, and thinking about the whole facilities portfolio on a building by building by building basis to understand whether it's just nice to have, good, or can I reduce that from my portfolio? We cannot afford, we're overbuilt for the portfolio. The revenues are not going up, the net revenues are not going up, yet the need is going up. So we have actually built beyond enrollment. Unless you're elite institutions or those top 200, which we're really not talking about, right? You cannot, you just can't continue those curves. They can't continue.

And then I'm going to add one other piece to this, Doug, and that is, do you know the average age of our buildings 55 years old? Gahh! And we haven't reinvested in those that were built between the 10 to 25 year either, so not to the level we should. So you see how these sort of waves of investment and reinvestment are necessary. And we're really losing. It's a losing game as the buildings decay.

DOUG LEDERMAN: [UNCLEAR] pivoted on the fly, and fairly successfully during the pandemic, but the reality it is, it didn't really have any choice but to do so. I could make the case that there won't be nearly as short-term pressure or incentive to make the next set of changes. How do you think about the compulsion that institutions might or might not feel in the next year or two to undergo the sort of rigorous analysis and potentially difficult decisions around use of the campus? Do you sense a willingness or commitment to doing hard things even if pressure on institutions eases somewhat?

LANDER MEDLIN: I remain hopeful, let me say it like that. Where I'm coming from, Doug, is the worst thing we can do is get lulled into the short-term gains of maybe we get some federal one-time investment of monies. Maybe we get back on the scale over the next, because we have about four years to do this, of enrollment increases. Because I actually think that enrollment will come back in the fall, right, at many of these institutions, all right?

The problem is the enrollment cliff is real. Go to Nathan Grawe's piece on the agile college and the

previous work. It's coming, and it's coming for everybody, including the elites. However, the elites will pull from the populations that would normally have gone to these other institutions. And it's going to, that birth-death, and that enrollment cliff that's coming in 2026, is real, and it's actually going to get worse because of 2020's pandemic said that we, the birth rates to 2 to 3 percent less, if my stats are right here. Which means that it's going to prolong this period. So we're not coming out of that for a while.

So if we get lulled into, well, we can come back, I think the worst possible thing we can think is, well, let's just wait it out, and we'll get back to normal. There is no get back to normal. This is, we have got to assess our particular situation, each individual institution.

I think the Northeast and Midwest Rust Belt have gone through this earlier than anyone else because of where the populations are and where people are going. We know this from watching what's been happening there. And that, that's why I commend the University of Akron in their work, because they are shedding themselves of a lot of space, as I'm reading what they're doing, and what's happening, and trying to firm up who they are, what they are about. They're also doing it with the community, and I think that's important. Doing things with the community, being part of that is going to be helpful. So, gosh, Doug, if people get lulled into that, we're just going to see this all over again, and it will be to their own demise.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Is there something you saw emerging from the very difficult last 15 months that makes you hopeful that colleges can step up with this challenging set of decisions?

LANDER MEDLIN: Something we learned during the pandemic, one of the best practices was around collaboration. The silos were broken, facilities talking to academics, talking to student affairs, to finance to... Everybody was part of the team. We had a purpose--get students back, right? Now we have to rally around that next purpose, and that is, we are going to collaborate to actually reduce the physical footprint of these institutions.

And wrap-around data... I mean, we've got really good data on the size of our institution, what the portfolio looks like... Is it overbuilt? What is the age? What is the backlog? What are all these things? And I'm here to tell you that the backlog of need, all of it does not need to be funded. What it needs to, it just needs to...we just need to address it. We need to decide whether even this particular building is no longer useful. It's already achieved its useful life, it's 80 or 90 percent used up. And we have to reimagine what that portfolio looks like because we can't fund it any longer. We do not have the

financial capacity for that built environment. That's what I'm saying.

And I think that sort of helps us think about how place matters--what are we going to use to advantage with remote, remote workplace, remote learning, and how do we move through that to take advantage of all aspects of that to rethink what our campus spaces look like... And we are going to, how are we going to use them to greater to continue the wonderful work that these institutions are doing? So...

DOUG LEDERMAN: Lander Medlin, thanks for being here. I appreciate your time.

LANDER MEDLIN: Absolutely.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was Lander Medlin, executive vice president of APPA: Leadership in Educational Facilities.

Our next and last discussion today is with two architects, Tomas Rossant and Alex O'Briant, whose firm, Ennead, works with colleges, hospitals, museums, government agencies, and other public-facing organizations on designing facilities and campus space to fulfill their missions.

Tomas and Alex, the University of Akron announced plans in February to consider selling, leasing, or repurposing up to one eighth of the office space and land it holds. That struck me as pretty unusual, but as people who watch this space closely, how typical or not is of conversations you unfolding on campuses around the country?

TOMAS ROSSANT: The Akron example that you cite is not really something we have visibility into. Most of our clients are top-tier public research universities or top-tier private universities and colleges, so the notion of de-acquiring and giving away real estate is being talked about, but nowhere near to the degree that you mentioned at Akron. I think that what the pandemic is doing is some people imagine that there's a kind of Darwinian natural selection happening and the weaker higher education institutions will slowly fade away, and the stronger ones will bolster themselves, and ideally, save the project of the liberal arts, and grow their enrollment.

And I think this kind of period that we're in right now that you mentioned is, the wheel is still in spin. I don't think Alex and I can tell you definitively where we're heading, but we can report that amongst the kind of healthy institutions of higher education, there's kind of a nervous excitement about tinkering with the business model, with the real estate model, with how we teach, with where we teach, to really make their institutions even stronger. And I'm very excited to see where that goes.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Alex, you want to add some thoughts there?

ALANDER MEDLIN: In our sphere that Tomas mentioned among a lot of state schools and the top-tier research institutions, we kind of seeing the kind of opposite effect of the Akron effect, which is they are leveraging this opportunity to really advance their plans to grow, whether it's to grow enrollments, but also grow their campuses in new and different ways. I mean, for instance, we're working with Georgia Tech, who's expanding further into mid-town as a part of their project to engage business and industry more directly, and just formulating this whole office corporate engagement that is going to be the kind of blanket for that.

So we're seeing among many of our clients this look at, like the fact that money's cheap right now, so it's easy to, interest rates are low, and so these institutions are taking plans they didn't create out of COVID, of course, these were things they've been eyeing for a while, and they're part of longer term trends. But most of them are moving ahead quite forcefully with those. While also, I think, beginning to realize that they need to do some more thoughtful strategic planning around the COVID issues on their campuses. And so I think that they're advancing some of these growth plans while also checking themselves a little bit and thinking about how to reconfigure things more broadly.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So some of the trends that people have been noting and anticipating, and, Tomas, take what you said about where we are in this cycle and being early, but there's obviously lots of talk about remote work and talk about reshaping the learning environment such that possibly more students study in different realms other than in a physical classroom. Does that mean that the institutions that you tend to work with don't necessarily anticipate those trends influencing them or just that they think that potentially reducing or changing their campus space isn't necessary to respond to those trends?

TOMAS ROSSANT: Oh, I think everybody is very excited about the trends and scratching their heads about how do we change, not only our spatial utilization, but what spaces we own, what spaces we operate, where those spaces are.

I got off the phone last week with a law school dean who has a state-of-the-art law school. And he wanted to pick my brains. He wants to open a second law school at the same university, and that law school is going to have a lower price point. It's all going to be remote, except for the kind of minimal communal aspects of learning law. It will be a very small building, right? Students will come to it maybe twice a semester, or four times a semester. And can you imagine that--a university with two law schools? So people are really trying new things.

On the other end of the spectrum, you know, I got off the, I had a call with a dean at a New England university, a state one, and she was livid because the provost was saying we have to eliminate two of your departments. It was to eliminate two departments because they couldn't eliminate tenured faculty. The contract only allowed them to eliminate tenured faculty if you stopped teaching the discipline. I think that's not going to happen at that university. She found a way around it, but could you imagine the kind of poverty of opportunity for kids if this starts to happen throughout the country?

So I think, you know, the law school model is the shiny end of where we can go, and, you know, this kind of consolidation and a race to the bottom is the dark shadows.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Alex...

ALEX O'BRIANT: So, you know, you mentioned two different flavors of that, and I think both of those are, universities are looking at somewhat separately, that there is the work space issue and then there's the classroom and the pedagogical issue. And, you know, they're very separate ecosystems, but they're really both important to the campuses bottom line, and to the success of the campus.

And, you know, on the classroom side, I think the move is going to be further towards the kinds of things that have the most value in person. That's the thing we've learned, is that we can be remote sometimes, but we need to be face-to-face, so I think the emphasis is going to be on the experiential learning, the teamwork, the sort of face-to-face projects. This is a trend the precedes COVID that's moved more towards experiential learning, and away from big lecture halls. And so it's almost like the pandemic just sort of pushed us over the ledge and sort of encouraged us to just go ahead and embrace this new direction and kind of start to rethink space more holistically and strategically out of necessity, which is, I suppose, a better reality than having to kind of reverse course on things that you've trying to do for many years because of a global health situation.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What are the issues the you encourage campus leaders to be thinking about as they engage with this questions of whether they have the right amount of space, the right space? Is there a framework you use as you work with colleges on these issues?

TOMAS ROSSANT: It's simplistic, but space is money. And the first question we often ask is: What type of accurate visibility do you have, whether it's a provost or some other leader of the institution into your spatial utilization? And what we're finding is relying on the registrar to say this is how often this room is booked, this is how often this seminar room is used, is very spotty, because it relies on kind of simplistic information, like someone booked it. But they don't know if someone actually used it, nor do they know how it was used. And we like to try to encourage institutions, and there are different levels you can do this, to get much more accurate information, either by using digital technology, or the old fashioned way the way that master planners do, you hang out for a long time, and you take a lot of notes. But you can't make strategic changes to your physical campus without accurate data as to how it's used.

The next step is really to understand institutional vision for the future. We can't tell them where to go, right? So if I'm a university president or a college president, and I'm taking very seriously the dilemma of higher education, I don't want to call it a crisis right now, but the dilemma of higher education, do I want to go to my trustees and say we can educate more people. Should our mission change and should we educate more people, either by doing some hybrid things, growing in the certain way, teaching during the summer, getting faculty to actually teach after 3:00 o'clock on the Friday, and getting faculty to teach before 3:00 PM on a Monday, like how can be actually exercise better results, better outcomes, educate more people while driving down the cost of our education? So it has to start with that notion of a vision.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I'm speaking with Tomas Rossant and Alex O'Briant, of Ennead Architects. Alex, you wanted to add something here?

ALEX O'BRIANT: Being apart has helped focus us all on the value of being together. And I think that that's the incredible moment for campuses, which are so steeped in the concept of place, and in-person learning and interaction, is an opportunity to really evaluate where we can get the most benefit culturally and educationally from being in person, because the thing we've learned in the last year is how to not be together.

Now the value proposition for campus is what can we offer in place? These campuses are expensive, so expensive to build and maintain, why bother? And so I think that's really the, you know, back to your question about what's next for campuses, I think you have to ask that question is like, what's the value of being together, and which things are more valuable than others?

TOMAS ROSSANT: To come back to one point that you made, which I think is really important, is this notion of what is the value of being together on campus? And, you know, we've started to formulate our own opinions, but I think there really has to be national discussion. Is it that I can see my faculty member during office hours? Maybe not. I can do that... I mean, we're having a conversation right now, and you could be my professor. Is it that I really like being in that 200-person lecture hall hearing a lecture? Well, not so much.

I think the real value of being in a learning culture physically in place is all the ad hoc critical dialog, all the kind of, you know, spontaneous interactions, what we call learning outside the classroom. And, ideally, we should still have that. I mean, I think we should still have, higher education should be focused on being in a place, but I think what we have to challenge and ask, do I have to be in that place 24-7? Do I have to be in that place for the whole semester? Can I say, hey, this semester it's just freshmen, right, who are on campus? And this next semester, it's seniors. And what does that do to the efficacy of learning and teaching?

ALEX O'BRIANT: It's going to take a tremendous leap of faith for many of the universities we work with to experiment with some of the radical models that Tomas was just going through, which are very fascinating. I mean, the changing relationship between learning and time is something whose potential has really been laid out over the last year. But what that will require is incredible experimentation with models that are very risky because, you know, when you have an unsuccessful one and your enrollment drops for a couple of years, when everybody says, well, that's not good. You don't want to go there. You know, it's a very dangerous thing for very well established institutions, which means that it might take an outlier to start to demonstrate that.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was Ennead architects Tomas Rossant, a design partner, and Alex O'Briant, a principal. Thanks to them, and to Lander Medlin and Nathan Mortimer, for their insights in the state of campus facilities, and what the discussions about campus space signal about whether college and university officials are ready to rethink what their institutions do and how they do it.

We're going to continue these discussions about higher education and innovation in the coming weeks.



Before we close, a reminder to subscribe to The Key on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Stitcher, or your favorite podcast platform. Thanks to all of you for listening. I'm Doug Lederman and this is The Key. Stay safe and stay well.