SENIOR YEAR HAS BEEN anything but typical for Benjy Renton. His study-abroad program in China was cut short in January 2020 by the coronavirus. Back at Middlebury College in Vermont, the student journalist joined a national team of researchers in development of a dashboard to contact-trace Donald Trump, documenting the impact of the former president’s...
COVID-19 infection.

When Middlebury officials initially announced plans to reopen campus in the fall, Renton had his doubts. “I was skeptical about the plans based on what was happening nationally in July, when there was no testing and the cases were spiking. I thought, ‘This is going to be terrible,’” he says.

But the semester exceeded Renton’s expectations. “I was pleasantly surprised at how much it did feel like being at school,” he says. “And it’s certainly much better to be on campus than in your parents’ basement.”

STAYING IN-PERSON

From the start of the pandemic, the College Crisis Initiative at Davidson College in North Carolina tracked some 1,900 four-year institutions and 1,000 two-year schools. About 55 percent of them opened for on-campus learning in the fall, according to founding director Chris Marsicano, an assistant professor of the practice of higher education at Davidson.

Overall, most schools’ efforts were successful — even if some had to be graded on a curve. “The vast majority of institutions that started in-person or hybrid (classes) stayed in-person or hybrid,” Marsicano says.

Not everyone got passing marks, of course. A number of campuses opened in the fall, only to scale back their in-person learning as COVID-19 spread through the student population. The University of Notre Dame in Indiana switched to online learning for two weeks in response to a spike in coronavirus cases; Oklahoma State University quarantined an entire sorority, while Colorado College had to quarantine a dormitory.

In the majority of cases where campuses reopening did go well, however, a set of common characteristics emerged, Marsicano says.

“First is controlling the mobility of students, not letting students leave campus,” he says. “Second is (coronavirus) testing. Colleges that tested every student (upon arrival) kept their cases down, because they could catch outbreaks before they happened.”

And those schools that succeeded with in-person learning focused on creating a campuswide culture in support of safe practices. “Those colleges that did well were able to convince everybody to wear...
masks all the time,” Marsicano says. “They were able push students to be accountable to each other. The schools that sent a message — we are all in this together — they did very well.”

CULTURE OF SAFETY
Duke University leaned heavily into testing, delivering close to 200,000 COVID-19 tests from August to November. “Over those four months we had a total of 152 positive tests, and 26 of those were students who tested positive on arrival,” says Michael Schoenfeld, Duke’s vice president for public affairs and government relations.
Widespread testing played a decisive role in the campus’ fall success, Schoenfeld says. “If you have people living and working together, testing and tracing is an essential piece of managing the health of that population,” he says. “If somebody tested positive, they were immediately put in isolation. We had set aside 300 beds on campus for isolation and quarantine. That absolutely had a significant impact on reducing the overall number of infections.”
Duke reduced the resident population from 6,000 to about 3,200. “That allowed every student to have a single room, and it reduced the density in shared bathrooms and dining facilities,” Schoenfeld says. The school also curtailed events and activities. “We had mandatory masking requirements from day one on campus, with a stringent policy for distancing,” Schoenfeld says. “We closed a number of common facilities — the libraries, the art museum.”
At Franklin Pierce University in rural Rindge, N.H., a collaborative approach was key to driving student adherence to COVID-19 guidelines. The school formed working groups comprised of students, faculty and staff to help guide the pandemic response and to garner broad buy-in among campus constituencies. “The working groups originally
convened over the summer and continued to meet throughout the fall semester to evaluate the effectiveness of our implementation and to respond to emerging challenges,” says university president Kim Mooney. “Those ongoing conversations have helped ensure that our approach during the pandemic was based on real-life daily experiences of the people who teach and work here and by those who live and learn here.”

OPEN COMMUNICATION

At Adelphi University on New York’s Long Island, frequent and open communication proved key in helping to keep all seven residence halls open through the fall semester.

In addition to limiting student gatherings and redesigning classroom spaces to allow for social distancing, the administration adopted a policy of “communicating transparently, consistently and concisely,” says Kristen Capezza, vice president of enrollment management and university communications.

“Our students and families — and the internal community of staff and faculty — received regular guidance leading up to and throughout the semester,” she says. The school’s website shared detailed information, with supporting videos to communicate key content.

“Our ‘Pledge to Protect’ was widely publicized to generate our community’s commitment to measures that intended to protect everyone’s health, safety and well-being,” Capezza says.

Of course, students aren’t going to get it right all the time. Having a student-centric disciplinary response helped some institutions smooth out the bumps and keep everyone aligned toward the greater community need.

At Rice University in Houston, for instance, a student-led COVID-19 Community Court adjudicated infractions and meted out penalties that included writing letters of apology, performing community service projects and meeting with advisers.

“There is only so much the administration can do. As an administrator, I don’t socialize with (students), I don’t eat with them, but their peers do,” says Emily Garza, Rice’s director of student judicial programs.

“Students need to see that their peers are also modeling this behavior and compelling them to comply,” Garza says. With the student-led court, “the people saying that this is important are the people who live with you and socialize with you and eat with you.”

LOOKING AHEAD

Schools that struggled can draw lessons from their more-successful counterparts. “It’s a matter of leadership,” Marsicano says. “In the fall, we saw that institutions whose leaders identified problems early, who made data-driven decisions and drew on their institutional ethos, were able to succeed.”

Marsicano added that a funding boost could also help. He notes that tests can cost as much as $100 each, and a vigorous program of frequent testing can represent a significant financial hurdle. “States need appropriate funds in support of this,” Marsicano says. “That would make a big difference.”