

# Year in Review: COVID-19's impact on the future of higher education

Reflections & Predictions from Experts around the Globe



## Introduction

Higher education institutions, which often drive the economic engine of nearby towns and cities, and serve as microcosms of society, have been sorely tested since the start of the pandemic in 2020. Acting in loco parentis, universities often provide room and board for their students, and always work to ensure their safety and security. Unfortunately, COVID-19 made it virtually impossible for many institutions to fulfill their obligations. By the end of March, school closures had been implemented to some extent in all 46 countries covered by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).<sup>1</sup>

Disruptive as this was for the students, it was a financial disaster for the schools. The hallowed halls of academia reverberated with debates about whether or not to reimburse students for room and board, even tuition. While only 5% of US higher ed students are enrolled in for-profit institutions,<sup>2</sup> we mustn't confuse non-profit with altruism. In the US, these institutions are managed as businesses, and businesses were hit hard by COVID-19. A 5% drop in enrollment could lead to almost \$7 billion in lost tuition and fees across all 4-year institutions in the U.S. alone.<sup>3</sup>

1 <https://www.oecd.org/education/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-insights-education-at-a-glance-2020.pdf>

2 <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/17/covid-19s-impact-profit-colleges-still-murky-second-quarter-earnings-arrive#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThere's%20a%20possibility%20we%20may,of%20U.S.%20higher%20education%20students.>

3 <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-us-higher-education-enrollment-preparing-leaders-for-fall>





In recent history, colleges and universities have had to compete for students so they've been adding and implementing amenities to entice matriculation. According to McKinsey, "Spending on student services has been growing four times as fast as spending on instruction." They suggest that "Given the budget stresses of the COVID-19 crisis, higher-education institutions may want to consider providing fewer, better ancillary services, while keeping the broader well-being of their students in mind."<sup>4</sup>

Parcel lockers, introduced as an amenity, have proven to be a necessity. They not only provide a contact-free way to distribute packages and mail, but during the pandemic, have also revealed themselves to have an even broader, campus-wide application.



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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/reimagining-higher-education-in-the-united-states>

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## Life in the mail center: that was then

No doubt about it, email caused letters to virtually disappear on college campuses, even as package delivery was multiplying exponentially. Despite the need for space, a recent survey conducted by Spaces4Learning, “Biggest Challenges for the Mailroom, Fall 2020, Higher Education”,<sup>1</sup> reported that 60% of the schools surveyed have only 400 square feet or less for storage.<sup>2</sup> To create space, some universities opted to get rid of the individual mailboxes that were once a mainstay of student life. That, however, did not solve for the need to inform students when they had packages, provide a way to manage distribution, or help create a contact-free environment.

Instead, the mail center notified students when packages arrived. Then face-to-face pick up happened during posted business hours, which, depending on time of day and time of year, could produce impatient crowds waiting for service.

## Life in the mail center: this is now

During COVID, both on-campus and off, the world was encouraged to follow two safety measures: wear masks and practice social distancing. These restrictions made the process of distributing packages even more complex. With budget cuts forced by loss of revenue, schools let go of or furloughed people they considered non-essential, including mail center personnel.

But higher ed proved resilient. They found ways to create hybrid learning environments. For instance, half the school would be on-campus for one semester, then the other. Food could be ordered and picked up at the cafeteria. COVID testing became a weekly ritual. And while the flow of packages diminished during the beginning of the pandemic, it picked up again as schools and students settled into this new routine. Mail centers resorted to scheduling appointments to retrieve packages and reimagined deliveries to students and staff who were no longer on-campus regularly.

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1 <https://www.quadient.com/resources/campus-operations-during-pandemic>

2 <https://www.quadient.com/resources/campus-operations-during-pandemic>

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## The future of the mail center

The OECD noted that “To remain relevant, universities will need to reinvent learning environments so that digitalization expands and complements, but does not replace, student teacher and student-student relationships.”<sup>3</sup> Happily, a US survey of more than 4,000 faculty members in early 2020, found that 45% had a better opinion of remote learning since the pandemic began.<sup>4</sup> Now accommodations need to be made to the physical campus as well.

The Spaces4Learning survey indicates that the biggest challenge for mail centers, coming in at over 46% of respondents, is the lack of space for storage, followed by not enough staff, at 30%.<sup>5</sup> However, while many universities would consider hiring more staff to solve for this, a better solution would be to install and use more parcel lockers. 42% of respondents have already invested in parcel locker solutions, and another 13% are planning to invest, or are currently looking at parcel locker solutions.<sup>6</sup>

## Why are parcel lockers key to a safe return to campus?

Smart parcel lockers offer a cost-effective, convenient, and automated solution for last-mile delivery to campuses, as well as pick-up of those deliveries by students and employees.

The delivery agent scans the package barcode and selects a door size, then a locker door opens automatically, and the package is placed in the locker. The door locks securely when it is closed. At this point, a delivery alert along with a unique PIN and barcode is sent via email or text message to the end-user to inform them that they have received a delivery.

The recipient can then go to the lockers at their convenience and enter the one-time PIN or scan the barcode provided, at which point their designated locker door pops open. When they retrieve their package, the space becomes available for a new delivery.

Not only does this reduce the risk of loss or theft, but it also eliminates the need for employees to field questions regarding package location or delivery status. In addition, employees can now turn their attention to higher-value tasks.

Everyone in the delivery process saves time, and the institution that invests in the locker system receives a strong ROI for this new campus amenity. And all those benefits can be extended to additional departments within the college or university.

## COVID innovations will extend into the future

As campuses started reopening, they had to manage guidelines put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19. That meant that access to everything on campus was determined by factors like how much square footage a particular space had, whether ventilation was adequate, if it could it be staffed safely, etc. Appointments had to be scheduled to pick up books at the library or to deliver a laptop for hardware help. Shopping at the bookstore meant waiting in line outside for your turn to go in.

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3 <https://www.oecd.org/education/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-insights-education-at-a-glance-2020.pdf>

4 “Time for class: COVID-19 edition,” Tyton Partners, July 2020, [everylearnereverywhere.org](http://everylearnereverywhere.org).

5 <https://www.quadient.com/resources/campus-operations-during-pandemic>

6 *ibid*

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Christopher O'Brien, Executive VP, Parcel Pending of Quadient, predicts parcel lockers will provide the solution for distributing all kinds of things on campus, giving users the ability to avoid lines and face-to-face contact. He refers to this as a Campus Hub, "an exchange point for different items, outside of mail and packages."

## Creating a Campus Hub experience

As quoted in Student Housing Business.com, O'Brien said, "... departments can house lockers wherever they need an asset exchange, and the locker can easily connect to an existing asset tracking software where all students and staff are already registered. There is no need to create a new process for communication. Instead, there is one simple process for drop-off and pick-up for all departments on campus. Additionally, funds can be pooled from various departments so that the investment cost for the system is reduced."<sup>7</sup>

"Think of each department as its own separate company," O'Brien said, "They can aggregate funds from separate departments to pay for the services. It doesn't always have to be the mail and package center or the housing department or the auxiliary services department funding parcel lockers. You can tap into other parts of campus and use some of their budget. No single entity has to support the entire solution."

With a simple software API, existing software solutions can be integrated so that students can order online and direct their orders to be delivered to the lockers. O'Brien tells us that many schools already have this technology. "There are already online university bookstores that offer the choice for an item to go into a locker, which is then tracked through to pick-up. There are even a couple of software solutions that allow you to charge for the item only when it is taken out of the locker."

This same process is being utilized by university libraries, creating a contact-free distribution and collection point for books and other materials. The library's back-office software connects with the parcel locker software to create a smart system that tracks materials being borrowed or returned. It can, for example, recognize when an item has

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7 <https://www.studenthousingbusiness.com/christopher-obrien-holiday-break-provides-time-for-communities-universities-to-re-evaluate-their-approach-to-goods-and-package-distribution/>

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been retrieved from the locker, sending a notification to the system, which then marks the item as checked-out and establishes the appropriate return date.

For IT departments, the parcel lockers are being used as a laptop exchange, which has become a growing use case for lockers on campus.

Two other key areas that parcel lockers will play an increasingly important role is in the sporting event and on-campus shopping experience. Security at stadiums remains a priority and parcel lockers can be used by game attendees who arrive with items that are not allowed inside. In addition, fans can pre-order team and university paraphernalia from the campus store and have it delivered to those stadium lockers for pick-up at game time. This creates additional revenue streams, decreases store congestion, and eliminates face-to-face contact. Outside of sporting events, campus stores can continue to use the parcel lockers to ensure social distancing guidelines, this is especially important during peak times, such as the first few weeks of each new semester, homecoming, or parent's weekend.

- **Accurate tracking**

Spaces4Learning said that after space and staff, accurate tracking is the biggest challenge mailrooms face. "Package rooms" have been offered as a solution but chain-of-custody is not the same.<sup>8</sup> As O'Brien points out, "Even with cameras, who knows whether someone walked in and took two packages or one, so the chain of custody is severely compromised inside campus mailrooms."

But with a turnkey web tracking solution you have reliable, end-to-end visibility into internal delivery activity. "When you integrate an existing university database with parcel locker software, it enables universities to pool interdepartmental funding for locker investments, using only one software license," said O'Brien. For instance, Parcel Pending by Quadient's Locker System for Higher Education comes with a built in Tracking Platform. With this the system can support mail, packages whether in a locker or behind the counter, and interdepartmental deliveries using only one system. This also enables each department to tap into the software, with one campus communication platform. Which includes full chain-of-custody for any delivery.

- **Appealing to carriers**

The United States Postal Service has a regulation that says they have to deliver a package to a specific address: they are not allowed to deliver to lockers on campus. However, no such restriction exists for private carriers, like UPS or FedEx. There are certain universities who proposed that carriers could deliver directly to each dorm on campus or visit one location. The response was resoundingly in favor of the parcel lockers.

O'Brien suggests this scenario, "We expect the carriers, including USPS, to work more and more with universities in assisting with loading lockers. They all want to ensure one successful attempt at delivery, and lockers provide that reliability. O'Brien also predicts that the ease of parcel delivery to the lockers will motivate more campuses to provide parcel lockers in the future.

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8 <https://www.quadient.com/resources/campus-operations-during-pandemic>

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## The right parcel locker vendor for your campus

Parcel Pending by Quadient is the leading provider of parcel locker solutions for higher education institutions. We offer parcel lockers that are:

- **Secure.** Our lockers keep an automatic log of every delivery and pick-up for full chain-of-custody visibility, and the sturdy steel construction keeps all contents safe.
- **Convenient.** Packages are available for easy retrieval 24/7, so there's no more waiting in long lines at the campus mail center.
- **Efficient.** They reduce labor, as fewer resources are required for parcel management, distribution, and pick-up.
- **Carrier agnostic.** Any delivery carrier can deliver to our parcel lockers.
- **Contactless.** Our lockers offer a contactless delivery, collection, and return process to remove queues and limit unnecessary contact with others.
- **Chain-of-custody.** Built in software platform to track all items on campus

With our expert analytics solutions, universities are able to receive instantaneous summaries that show how the lockers are being used, track capacity and turnover, and see when stale packages need to be removed. Since Parcel Pending by Quadient Lockers come with tracking software visibility, the security is there for all for assets moving across campus, whether they are stored in a locker or not.



## Conclusion

In a post-COVID world, parcel lockers provide a contact-free way to distribute packages purchased by students, and others. They also have broader, campus-wide applications, as anything can be placed in them by any department with access to the system. Both in 2021 and beyond, universities must rethink the way they support all types of on-campus deliveries. With lockers, the IT department can safely distribute laptops; the library can deliver research materials; the bookstore can fulfill orders, and the list goes on. Parcel lockers are no longer just for mailrooms.

One of higher education's primary goals is to teach students to think critically. We invite you to do the same as you explore ways to minimize contact and maximize ease-of-pickup and delivery—of anything—on a post-pandemic campus.



### About Quadient®

Quadient is the driving force behind the world's most meaningful customer experiences. By focusing on four key solution areas including Customer Experience Management, Business Process Automation, Mail-Related Solutions, and Parcel Locker Solutions, Quadient helps simplify the connection between people and what matters. Quadient supports hundreds of thousands of customers worldwide in their quest to create relevant, personalized connections and achieve customer experience excellence. Quadient is listed in compartment B of Euronext Paris (QDT) and belongs to the SBF 120 index.

For more information about Quadient, visit [www.quadient.com](http://www.quadient.com)

