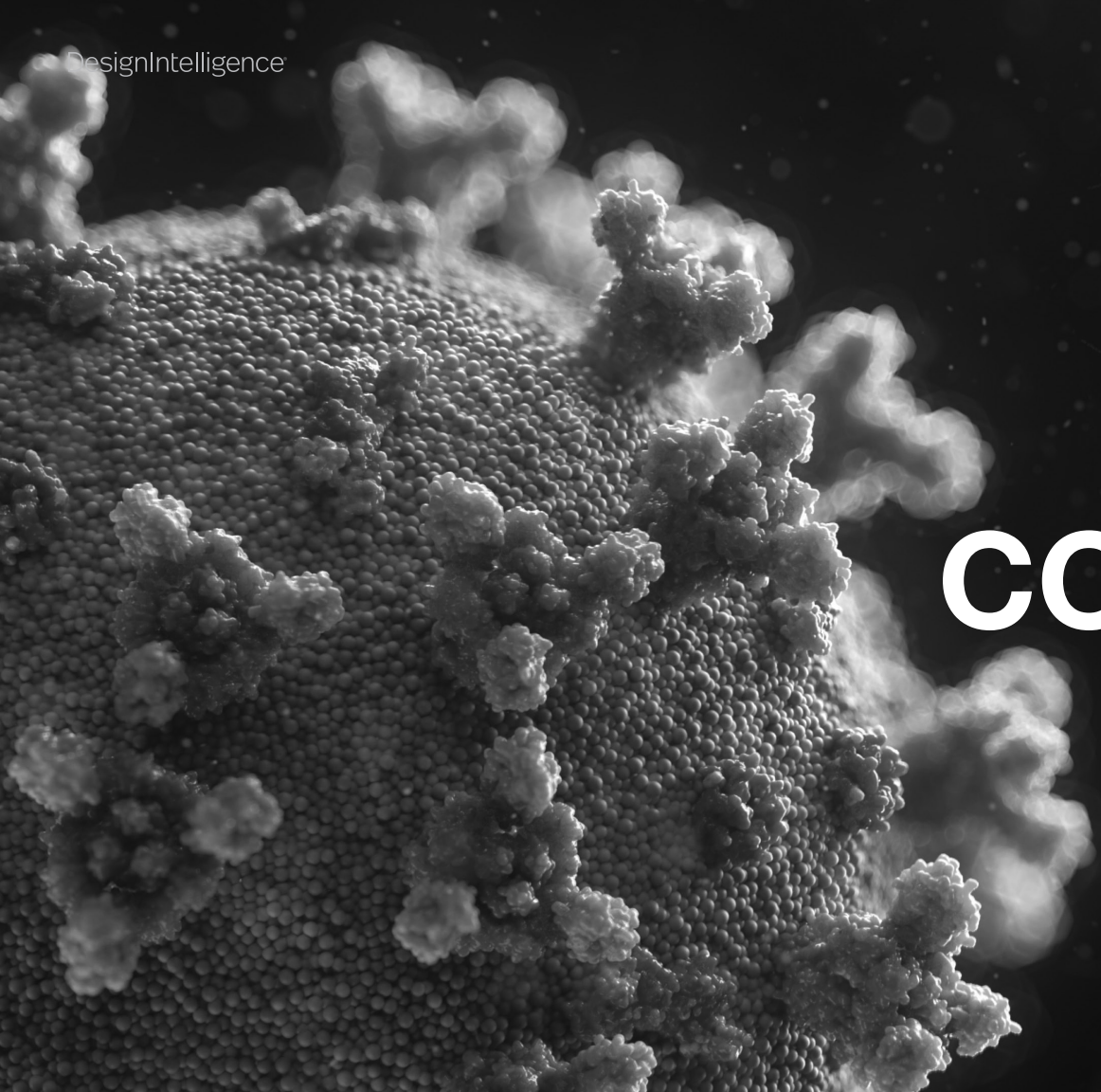


DesignIntelligence



SPECIAL EDITION  
**CORONAVIRUS**  
DesignIntelligence®



**Crises Drive Innovation**  
in Higher Education

DesignIntelligence



## BARBARA WHITE BRYSON

Associate Dean for Research,  
College of Architecture, Planning  
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*In a call to create opportunity from crisis, Barbara Bryson challenges academic leaders.*

From The Chronicle of Higher Education, March 19, 2020: “Moody’s Investors Service issued a bleak forecast this week for higher education in America, downgrading it from ‘stable’ to ‘negative’ in light of the pandemic.”

Moody’s hasn’t been a big fan of higher education for a while, and the recent Coronavirus-related closures haven’t helped an industry that has had a hard time with self-examination.

### **Opportunities Lost: The Need for Change**

Hundreds of millions of dollars, perhaps billions, will be lost by an industry already burdened by forty years of overbuilding, deferred maintenance, slowing enrollments, and a lack of innovation. Many

industry professionals understand the higher education business plan is broken. Most everyone also recognizes that students now entering our campuses are very different in demographic profile, economic profile, cultural profile, and educational experience than the students of forty years ago. Yet, the inertia of the giant gorilla of higher education cannot adjust to anything other than a cohort-based four to six-year experience for our students.

Around us, entire industries have changed. The design and construction industries are in the middle of extraordinary change, pressured by competitors, market, economy, and labor scarcity – not to mention technology. However, the schools of architecture have rarely

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*Sometimes, a late freeze will delay spring for a few weeks, but once that spring arrives, it is twice as beautiful.*

adjusted to reflect the industry needs or to prepare students for a very different future. Innovation in teaching is excruciatingly difficult to achieve. Before the pandemic, upon hearing suggestions of putting studio classes online, some faculty and administrator eyes rolled back into their heads.

### **New Possibilities**

But not today... Today, we in higher education and design education are imagining all sorts of possibilities for teaching innovation, syllabus revision, and program reinvention. Some of this innovation is generated by the immediate need to go online. Other innovations are quickly growing from realizing that the university closures will severely impact our budgets. We are learning to collaborate, research and, somehow, hold jury reviews remotely. One of our most significant challenges is how we will build community for our students remotely.

### **Lessons and Learning**

We will learn many lessons from this time of forced innovation. One important lesson is to recognize we are not all equally equipped to thrive in isolation. During Coronavirus, connectivity has become our salvation, our access to education, our only social network, and our metaphorical lifeblood. At this time, we need to be aware that lack of connectivity, for whatever reason, is a form of being disadvantaged. Happily, universities are working hard to address this challenge, one that existed before Coronavirus but has been brought into sharp focus by this crisis.

Other lessons include realizing that campuses can be smaller. We do not need so much space. Campuses must unload the heavy burden of financing and maintaining so many buildings. Large individual administrator and faculty offices should quickly retreat to history. We can be flexible and adaptive to students' needs.

We are learning through this process: our students want to learn but need support. Often very different kinds of support because they come from very different backgrounds. Sometimes the support is financial because the student or a family member has lost service-oriented income during the pandemic. Sometimes the student needs time-flexibility because they have children to care for at home because of school closures. Sometimes the student simply does not have the

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*This innovation – a movement toward a more adaptive education - could be a tremendous long-term strategy for higher education and design schools.*

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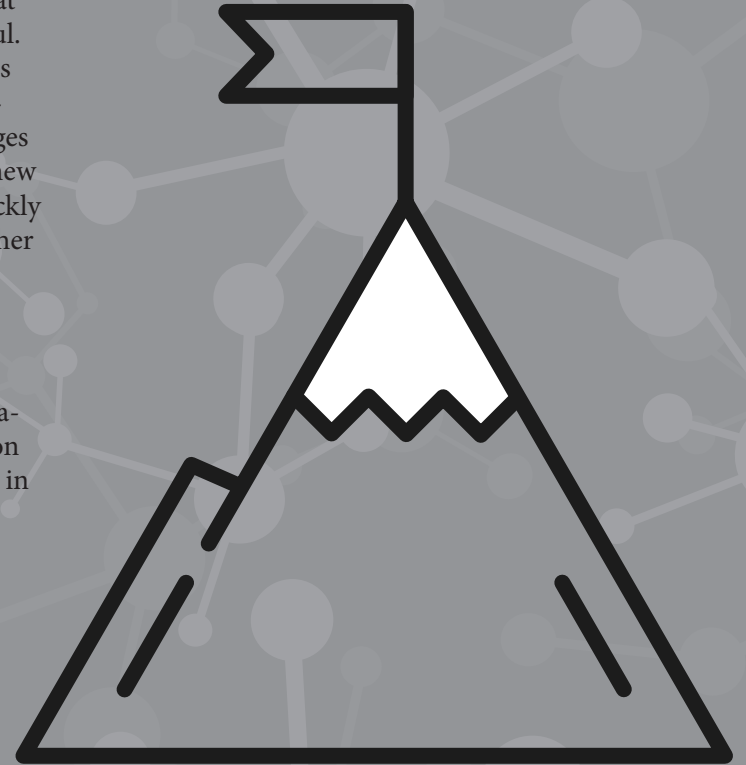
connectivity needed to be successful. We are learning that our students are truly unique and that we have to be better listeners. We must be more innovative so we can be more supportive and adaptive.

This innovation – a movement toward a more adaptive education – could be a tremendous long-term strategy for higher education and design schools. Our students have different needs than they did forty years ago. They come to us with different skills. The industries of design, planning, and construction are morphing and expanding with different job descriptions being written every day. These jobs translate and interface between technology and human contributions. New jobs have emerged that support the industries, enable technology, stimulate collaboration, connect communities, and enhance communication.

### **The Long Term View**

Sometimes, a late freeze will delay spring for a few weeks, but once that spring arrives, it is twice as beautiful. Our current challenges and closures are changing higher education profoundly. Moody's downgrade changes bond pricing, which means many new higher education projects have quickly stalled. Stopping projects hurts higher education as well as the design and construction industries.

From this crisis, if we can develop innovations that make higher education stronger – and design education better – the professions will benefit in the long term.



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