

Re-Thinking Higher Education for a Post-Pandemic World | Snapshot: Access

Introduction

In this conversation, we focus on the challenge of equitable access to higher education since the Covid-19 crisis began in the early part of 2020. We primarily rely on a very small portion of the massive plethora of media reporting and research reports since peer-reviewed papers are only beginning to come out now. We have attempted to take stock of where things stand, to identify missing information that could inform a research agenda, and to consider the high-level viability of pandemic-inspired solutions. Issues around the challenges associated with access to higher education in a Covid—and we hope soon a post-Covid—environment span a wide spectrum of affected key stakeholders in the academy—from faculty and students to administrators and parents.

The Academy

- While there is likely to be a noticeable decline in enrollment over the next few years, institutions of different types are not being affected equally. According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center ([NSCRC](#)) and the American Council on Education ([ACE](#)), freshman enrollment is down nationwide by 16.1 percent.
- While two-thirds of all community colleges report enrollment decreases of 10% or more, more elite institutions within the Ivy League and similar highly ranked players will be much less affected.
- Data from the [National Association for College Admission Counseling](#) details how some schools are opting to go test optional in admissions since so many students are unable to take the standardized exams. By August, more than 1,200 institutions had announced test optional policies.
- Some doctoral programs, 50 by most recent count, are canceling admissions for 2021 so they may continue to support current students. Delaying admissions could also mean that more diverse students are less likely to enroll later if contact is lost.
- As many of one tenth of employees at colleges have become unemployed since the Covid crisis began.

Faculty

- In addition to heightened faculty anxiety about job safety, particularly for adjuncts on insecure contracts, grappling with the reality of teaching fully online has brought out additional concerns. These have included insecurity about how effective their teaching is, to whether students can appropriately and sufficiently interact in a virtual environment, to if and to what degree students' mental health and well-being is being affected.
- Other concerns have included the ability to stay productive while working from home, particularly as a parent of young children, and maintaining a research agenda. Further concerns are about simply burning out.
- Finally, another impact of Covid on faculty has been to reengage in campus politics and attempt to reclaim much of their power vis-à-vis the administrative estate.

Students

- According to some of the recent research, the impact of Covid-19 on college and university students has been remarkably heterogenous: delayed graduation, lost internships and job opportunities, and an uncertain educational and professional future are ubiquitously shared anxieties. However, the impact of these anxieties varies by socioeconomic status.
- Online learning has a long way yet to go to become effective for students and instructors alike. Some methods of course delivery, such as HyFlex, can be flexible but its effectiveness mostly depends on course type. There will need to be more support for faculty and students to advance successful online learning in an equitable way.

- Some students are struggling to manage multiple identities working from home struggling with online learning.
- International students are a vulnerable group and targets of prejudice. Nine out of ten international students are still at their U.S. universities. They were unable to leave, thought Covid would be short lived, did not want to take classes in different time zones.

Administrators

- There will be more pressure on administration to acknowledge and ensure protection for its population of service workers in hospitality, food service, custodial, etc. These workers have lost their jobs sooner than all other areas of higher education, the future for them looks particularly bleak.

Parents

- While many parents are anxious about their children's mental well-being due to the impact of Covid-19 on their lives and recognize that their children's college experiences are far different from their own, many remain pragmatic that the crisis will pass.
- The mental health impact of Covid-19 on students has not been as bad as it was expected to be.

Some Proposed Innovations

- Will a new administration advance a movement toward tuition free higher education, at least at two year and state institutions?
- Might more types of flexible enrollment models develop?
- Will the trend toward test optional admissions continue, what are the implications?
- Will a new administration increase Pell Grant funding?
- Will the online teaching and learning experience we have had as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic inspire more fluid access to the technology needed for virtual learning around the world?

While COVID-19 is intensifying the issues faced by higher education, it can create an opportunity for the sector to reimagine itself and address the systems that originated these problems. "The higher education sector has long been criticized for shying away from engaging in leveling the playing field and avoiding the issue of the high cost of college and other systemic barriers to access. While the pandemic presents an opportunity for institutions to address structural inequality, they must make a commitment to it." -Michael Sorrell 23rd annual Milken Institute Global Conference, GWU.

Some Questions for Consideration

- Will Covid sharpen HE considerations about equity and access?
- Will international students return, and what will attract them to the U.S. again?
- What will be the long-term mental health effects of Covid-19 on students, faculty, staff?
- Will fewer HEIs mean better quality, more attention to tuition, services, ROI?
- What are some of the lessons the U.S. can learn from how other countries and systems responded?
- How has Covid impacted the most vulnerable students, such as refugees and at-risk migrants?