

COVID-19 laid bare the inequities in Higher Education. Now, we risk losing an entire generation

As we approached September, we had months to plan for how to make higher education work in this perilous climate, but we failed.

By Audrey Fisch, Opinion Contributor

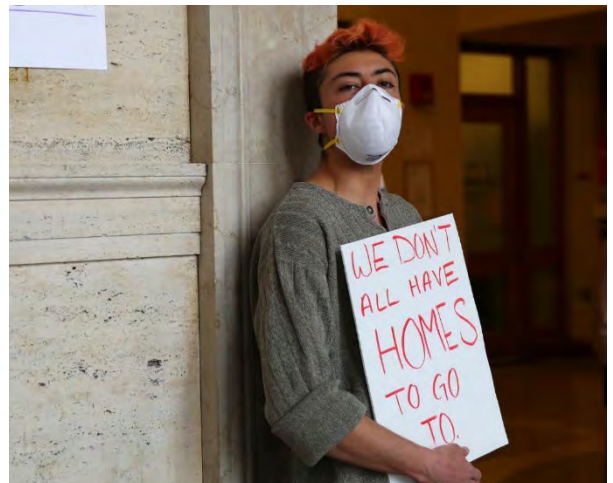
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When COVID-19 peaked in the Northeast, my home state of New Jersey moved into lockdown, including remote instruction for the state college and university systems. This educational shift, the virus's disproportionate impact on Black and brown communities, and economic dislocation have had enormous impacts on the aspirations of students from low-income families who seek the transformational power of higher education.

For many families living below the poverty line in New Jersey and across the country, public universities and community colleges offer opportunity: to be the first in the family to receive a college education and to take a step up the ladder of social mobility. Today, one-fifth of college students nationally come from low-income backgrounds, and more than half are first-generation students — many of whom rely on public education institutions to transform their lives and the lives of their families. Even as economic mobility has decreased in the U.S. and higher education has become increasingly unaffordable, higher education continues to play a critical role in the American dream.

COVID-19 has been distinctly destructive to those dreams for first-generation college students.

Let's talk first about the educational disruption: many American families have simple access to high-speed internet connections, data, and technology, but low-income students don't necessarily have these resources. With an unanticipated pivot to remote instruction, some of my students found themselves unable to maintain the bandwidth for live Zoom discussions, were forced to share a single device among a family of learners, and struggled to complete essays and exams on cell



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phones. Some broadband companies touted their resources for low-income students, but many students found these putative offers difficult to access or hollow. Institutions tried to step in with laptop loaner programs and digital hotspots, but you can imagine how difficult it was to roll out these services with skeleton staffs on campus, students scattered, and iffy transportation networks. By the time we were able to contact students, assess their needs, communicate those needs to the appropriate administrator, and deliver the equipment, weeks of learning were lost.

Educational disruption, however, was not simply an issue of technology needs. Most of my low-income students work 30 hours a week or more. Not only do they not benefit from financial support from their families, they often are part of their family's earning community, particularly in times of crisis. The economic fallout from COVID-19 was exactly that crisis: it forced numerous college-age students from low-income families to put their family's financial needs ahead of their education. Imagine how challenging it was for these students to attempt to complete the second half of the Spring '20 academic semester while serving as their family's sole breadwinner, trying to make ends meet with hourly jobs at Big Box stores or as freelancers with Amazon and Uber.

Other students, those who were not themselves essential workers, found different responsibilities on their plates beginning in March. As their parents or extended families continued to work outside the home and even took on more hours, these first-generation college students juggled their education alongside child or elder care. One young woman in my class found herself solely responsible for her three young cousins; Zoom classes and homework needed to wait. Another entered our online classroom shaken by a difficult conversation, urging his ailing grandmother who was having difficulty breathing to go to the hospital. She ultimately was hospitalized with COVID-19 and recovered, but his class participation and concentration that day was hardly on par with his pre-COVID excellence. These families were not unsupportive of the educational dreams of their children, but day-to-day reality and a lack of understanding of the demands of higher education from those who have never been to college produced an environment in which educational success was enormously challenging.

As we begin the fall semester, leaders are focused on the challenging but short-term questions surrounding reopening schools: Can schools safely open? Will teachers return? Can students learn? Trump insists. Governors worry. Superintendents and college presidents try to respond and implement two-weeks delays or lockdowns. There's limited money, endless need, and no simple or clear answers.

What awaits the young people or returning students who aspire to higher education in order to reshape their lives? Cuts, uncertainty, and lack of decisive planning.

Many institutions, including the state colleges in New Jersey, have implemented cost-cutting measures. Rutgers University ratified cuts, and St Peter's, a private, Jesuit institution with a history of serving underrepresented students in New Jersey, announced furloughs of 45 employees. Despite

these cuts (and the concomitant reduction in services students can expect), most public institutions have not reduced tuition. At least one N.J. public institution voted to raise tuition for 2020-2021 by 3.5 percent. Frankly, the institutions need the funds.

Funding issues, politics, and guesswork underscore the uncertainty about reopening plans as well. K-12 and higher-ed institutions have delayed re-openings, pivoted online, and then pivoted back to some version of face-to-face instruction. Sometimes with only days' notice, students and families are expected to adjust and adapt. For low-income families in precarious circumstances, for first-generation students needing to navigate a balance between the demands of school and work, the constantly shifting ground of higher education is deadly quicksand.

In March, we shifted to remote instruction, faced economic disaster, and witnessed a pandemic for which we were unprepared. COVID-19 exposed the inequities in higher education that experts have been sounding the alarm about for decades. As we approached September, we had months to plan for how to make higher education work in this perilous climate, but we failed.

Today, we simply don't have a plan to support our vulnerable yet promising next generation of college graduates. We aren't ready to help them learn as they grapple with work, family, and illness. We don't have the systems in place to support their dreams. The transformational power of higher education could be another casualty of the coronavirus in New Jersey and the U.S.

Now is the time for a focus on long-term solutions.

We can continue to think short-term, pass the buck, focus on two weeks at a time, and hope and pray that the virus and the economic disruption it wrought will disappear after election day. If policymakers and educational leaders don't seize the day to make the systemic, long-term changes we need, it isn't the virus that will disappear in November. Instead, it will be the hopes and dreams of a generation of young people, whose educational aspirations will have been dashed, not just by COVID, but by our unwillingness to support the transformational power of American education.

There's still some time. Carpe diem, leaders, legislators, funders, educators.

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