
COVID-19 and the Racial Equity Implications of Reopening College and University Campuses

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COVID-19 forced many colleges and universities to suspend in-person operations in spring 2020. Students and instructors abruptly shifted to virtual learning and teaching, and most employees began working remotely during the global pandemic. Presented in this article are 12 racial equity implications for federal and state policy makers, as well as higher education leaders, as they consider reopening campuses across the United States.

COVID-19 is affecting most aspects of teaching, learning, and employment at higher education institutions across the United States. College and university presidents and other institutional leaders are investing tremendous time and energy into finding ways to reopen campuses as safely and as quickly as possible. Campus task forces are balancing public health concerns with financial considerations. Attention is also being paid to supporting faculty members in adapting to hybrid or, in many instances, fully online forms of teaching. Plans are being developed to ensure physical distancing in classrooms, labs, residence halls, and campus dining facilities. In addition, institutions with big-time intercollegiate sports programs are pursuing various ways to afford student-athletes opportunities to compete, even if doing so must occur in stadiums and arenas with no fans to cheer them on. The pandemic has left all of us in higher education with much to do and rethink. As we continue engaging in the important planning and recovery activities described thus far, it is important that we also devote serious attention to numerous racial equity threats. I present a dozen of these threats below.

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1. Disproportionately Placing Essential Workers at Risk

White professionals occupy the most significant positions of leadership in just about every industry in the American economy (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020), including higher education. According to a 2019 report from the American Council on Education, 73% of full-time instructional faculty members and more than 80% of professionals in most leadership positions at our nation's postsecondary institutions are white (Espinosa et al. 2019). In 2018, 46% of professionals in low-level service roles were employees of color (Institute of Education Sciences 2020). Given the positions they disproportionately occupy, white employees have greater flexibility to work remotely and teach online. Custodians, food service workers, groundskeepers, and maintenance staff, however, are far likelier to be deemed "essential workers" when campuses reopen. Being required to come to campus more frequently and interact with other workers and students therefore places employees of color and the family members with whom they live at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19. Campus reopening plans must consider the racial stratification of the workforce, specifically the health implications for employees of color and lower-income essential workers. Federal aid specifically earmarked for the safety of essential workers would help postsecondary institutions provide personal protective equipment, cleaning supplies, contact tracing, and testing, all of which would reduce the risk of disproportionately exposing employees of color to the coronavirus.

2. Racialization of Layoffs and Terminations

Because higher education workplaces are so stratified by race, employees of color are more vulnerable to financial cutbacks. Tenure-track faculty members, as well as professional staff in mid-level and senior-level roles, are less likely than are administrative assistants, workers in the aforementioned service roles, and part-time instructors to be laid off or terminated. On the one hand, roles in which employees of color are disproportionately represented are considered essential to campus operations. But on the other hand, they are positions with

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the least amount of professional security. “Essential” typically means “essential to provide a service,” and when that service is no longer needed, the persons performing it are laid off or terminated. The work that most people of color do in higher education institutions can be performed by lower-cost temporary workers or redistributed to a smaller number of colleagues in their units (which would also result in workload inequities). COVID-19 has exacerbated racial disparities in joblessness throughout the American economy, with unemployment rates for black workers being highest (Gould and Wilson 2020). Financial effects of the pandemic will be felt for many years, which will force higher education leaders to make tough workforce reduction decisions. Inattention to the race of the persons being terminated and laid off will inevitably yield pronounced negative effects on employees of color given the positions they occupy. Hence, campus reopening plans must specify ways to avoid even more significant employment inequities by race. Federal and state financial investments would help minimize the necessity of workforce reductions at higher education institutions.

3. Risk of Violence for Asian American and Asian International Students and Employees

Recent studies document stigmatization, stereotyping, and discrimination, as well as acts of physical violence toward Asian Americans and Asian immigrants in the United States throughout the pandemic (Chen et al. 2020). The president of the United States repeatedly characterizing COVID-19 as “Kung Flu” and the “Chinese Virus” likely accelerated bias and hate crimes against these groups. During the 2018–19 academic school year, there were 1,606,688 Asian American students, faculty, and staff at postsecondary institutions across the country (Institute of Education Sciences 2020). Also many international students and workers on visas are from Asian countries. Associating them with the coronavirus will undoubtedly continue as people return to campuses. Attitudinal stereotypes may lead to harmful behaviors ranging from constant racial microaggressions to physical violence against anyone who appears to be Asian. Tessler et al. (2020) suggest these threats pose considerable mental health and anxiety challenges for this population. Thus, campus reopening plans must include ways to protect Asian and Asian American people.

4. Sinophobic and Xenophobic Travel Bans and Visa Complications

Even though rates of infection and death are presently higher in America than anywhere else in the world (Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center 2020), COVID-19’s association with people from Asian countries broadly

and China specifically could lead to implicit (or perhaps even explicit) biases in the review of visa applications for students wishing to study at US colleges and universities. If there is a second wave of the coronavirus, there may be travel bans prohibiting students from China and other countries from entering the United States. Federal regulations and oversight are needed to ensure this does not occur in sinophobic or otherwise discriminatory ways. In addition, international students may need assistance from US colleges and universities to negotiate re-entry into home countries that attempt to ban their return from campuses, states, and regions where there were COVID-19 resurgences.

5. Trauma and Grief Support for Persons Disproportionately Experiencing Loss

COVID-19 infections and deaths are disproportionately affecting African Americans and other communities of color (Poteat et al. 2020). Because of this, students and workers from these groups are likelier than are their white classmates and colleagues to have lost a family member, friend, or someone in their community. This likelihood means that students of color and employees of color are much more susceptible to depression, prolonged sadness, and other emotions arising from the loss of people they know. They will be required to balance grief and perhaps trauma with academics and professional work. Reopening plans must include ways to ensure these campus community members have more than adequate mental and emotional support resources.

6. Sending Infected Students Home to Vulnerable Families and Communities

Most students come to college from same-race families. It is therefore reasonable to presume that many Native American undergraduates, for example, will return home to Native American families during holidays and breaks, perhaps even occasionally on weekends throughout the semester. Many postsecondary institutions plan to conclude on-campus living and learning by Thanksgiving in anticipation of a possible second wave of the virus (Hubler 2020). Students who become infected with COVID-19 and then return home pose a risk of infecting others in their families. Given the disproportionately higher numbers of coronavirus infections and deaths among people of color, it is plausible that students of color returning home from college could pose an especially big risk to already vulnerable communities. Reopening plans have to consider the consequences of

sending infected students of color home to communities that have already been disproportionately devastated by COVID-19.

7. Placing Black Men's Football and Basketball Players at Disproportionately Higher Risk

Football is a contact sport. In addition to tackling each other and transmitting germs on balls being passed from player to player, football student-athletes and their peers who play on other intercollegiate sports teams exercise, dine, travel, and watch films together, often in extremely close proximity. Colleges and universities have begun bringing student-athletes back to campus for practices and conditioning; they are being tested regularly, in some instances daily (Hobson 2020). Institutions, especially those with big-time sports programs, scrambled to find creative ways to ensure crowd control and physical distancing in stadiums by the start of the 2020 college football season (Higgins 2020). There are indeed ways to bolster protections for spectators. But doing so for student-athletes is much more difficult. In 2018, black men were 2.4% of undergraduate students enrolled at the 65 universities in the "Power Five" athletic conferences (i.e., ACC, Big 10, Big 12, Pac 12, and SEC), yet they comprised 55% of football teams and 56% of men's basketball teams on those campuses (Harper 2018). Thus, participation in these two contact sports places black undergraduate men at disproportionate risk of COVID-19 infection.

8. Financial Support for Chronically Underfunded Minority-Serving Institutions

Since their founding, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have been persistently underfunded (Harper et al. 2009). Most HBCU students are black. Tribal colleges are among the poorest in US higher education (Nelson and Frye 2016). Most students who attend them are Native American. Relative to other postsecondary institutions, community colleges enroll disproportionately higher numbers of black, Latino, Native American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and multiracial undergraduates (Institute of Education Sciences 2020). Those colleges also are funded at lower rates than other public institutions of higher education in most states (McKinney and Hagedorn 2017). Reconfiguring classrooms, labs, residence halls, locker rooms, and dining halls to ensure physical distancing costs money. In addition, income lost from students who pay to live on campus, employees and visitors who pay to park and dine in campus facilities, and other revenue-generating sources is having an enormous impact on college

and university budgets. Technological substitutions for in-person teaching and learning are expensive; so too are commercial training experiences that aim to help postsecondary faculty members teach better in hybrid and entirely online formats. Given these and other ensuing fiscal challenges, institutions that were already financially stressed before the pandemic are surely even more so now. Federal and state plans must include equitable investments of public dollars into campuses that enroll the highest numbers of students of color and low-income collegians. Investing additional federal COVID-19 recovery funds specifically into HBCUs, tribal colleges, and community colleges also would help them serve and protect the low-income Americans they educate, who are mostly students of color.

9. Addressing Racialized Digital Access Inequity

Several K–12 schools and postsecondary institutions had to provide students laptops, tablets, and other technologies when instruction abruptly moved online in March 2020 (McMurtrie 2020). Supplying devices often was not enough, as some lower-income students lacked access to Wi-Fi and reliable high-speed internet (Flaherty 2020). Given how poverty and race commingle in the United States, students of color, especially those who returned home to predominantly monoracial, low-income communities, have been disproportionately affected by digital inequities throughout the pandemic (Galperin et al. 2020). As colleges and universities consider reopening in phases, with a fraction of courses meeting on campus and others online, plans must include strategies and investments in closing digital access gaps for the students of color who continue to access courses from their homes in lower-income communities.

10. Repeated Inattention to Students Experiencing Housing and Food Insecurity

Students who lived on campus had to abruptly vacate their residence halls in March 2020. They were instructed to return home. Insufficient attention was paid to demonstrating care for those who did not have homes to which they could return (Redden 2020). There are at least three important implications for campus leaders. First is the need for a strategy to support students experiencing food and housing insecurity. The Los Angeles Unified School District, the second-largest K–12 district in the United States, provided more than 45 million meals to students and families throughout the pandemic (Regardie 2020). Many other K–12 districts across the country also fed children who heavily depend on schools for meals (Dunn et al. 2020). Reopening plans for postsecondary

institutions will be incomplete if they fail to consider ways to feed virtual learners who rely on meal plans and campus food pantries. More partnerships are needed like those Compton College formed with Everytable and GrubHub to deliver meals to its students during the pandemic (Whitford 2020). Second, if campus facilities must again be swiftly shut down due to a local spike in COVID-19 infections, a solid plan has to be in place to safely house and feed students who do not have homes to which they can return. And, third, given the disproportionately higher numbers of black and Latino collegians who experience housing and food insecurity (Vasquez et al. 2019), reopening plans must specify ways to get resources to these students. Not considering racial equity in the writing and implementation of these plans will inevitably exacerbate racialized housing and food inequities.

11. Upskilling Faculty Members in Teaching Students of Color Online

Black, Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander students are severely underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics departments (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 2019). Courses in these majors are likeliest to be among the first taught in person because many require laboratory work that cannot be performed online. Therefore, academic programs that enroll the highest numbers of collegians of color probably will be delivered in remote formats. Many colleges and universities, including my own, are investing considerably into developing the skillfulness with which instructors teach online. Active learning, dynamic student engagement strategies, and technological fluency are often emphasized. Unless these faculty development activities also include some serious attention to race and racism, problems that existed in classrooms prior to the pandemic are likely to intensify online. College students of color have long deemed teaching practices culturally unresponsive and have noted how curricula routinely failed to include their cultural histories, identities, and interests. Many of these students have also specified the racial microaggressions and other racist experiences they have had inside and outside of college classrooms (Harper 2015; Harper and Davis 2016; Ogunyemi et al. 2020; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2019; Yeo et al. 2019; Yosso et al. 2009). Most black students are taught by white instructors, as ratios of black students to black faculty are often incredibly imbalanced at predominantly white institutions (Harper and Simmons 2019). Given all this, faculty development activities included in campus reopening plans cannot focus just on creative teaching tricks to keep all students engaged online—they also must pay particular attention to ensuring that collegians of color are not experiencing the same racism in virtual classrooms that they have long experienced in on-campus learning environments prior to the pandemic.

12. Racialization of Input and Stakeholder Feedback

Given that most presidents, senior administrators, and trustees/regents at colleges and universities are white (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges and Gallup 2020; Espinosa et al. 2019), final determinations about the implementation of campus reopening plans will inevitably be made, in some instances almost entirely, by white institutional decision makers. Deliberately seeking input and feedback from students, faculty, and staff members of color would minimize the risk of well-intentioned white institutional actors creating seemingly color-blind policies, strategies, and reopening plans that have unintended negative consequences on communities of color. Relying narrowly on the perspectives of only a handful of nonwhite campus stakeholders would be insufficient, perhaps even racially harmful. Professionals of color who work in service positions, a variety of instructional capacities (including tenure-track, part-time, adjunct, clinical, and contingent faculty members), and healthcare roles at universities that have hospitals also should be consulted; their feedback has to be taken seriously. And, of course, advice that undergraduate and graduate students of color offer their institutional leaders also should guide campus reopening plans.

Conclusion

Each of these 12 racial equity considerations is important, regardless of whether campuses resume in-person operations this fall or at some point in 2021. To be sure, these are not the only equity implications, racial or otherwise, to be considered when reopening college and university campuses. Nonetheless, federal and state policy makers, as well as regents and trustees, presidents and senior administrators, and faculty members, must take them seriously. Congress and higher education stakeholders should also continually engage students, faculty, and staff members of color to pursue additional insights into coronavirus-related threats to racial equity. Negligence in doing so will result in the emergence of new disparities and the amplification of racial inequities that COVID-19 has already produced.

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