Where Do We Go from Here? Reflections on the Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education in the United States from Two Recent TRIO Graduates

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The United States is praised for its stand-up fight for equality, freedom, diversity, and unity; despite the realities of misogyny, xenophobia, structural racism, and income inequality constantly conflicting these ideas. This juxtaposition is no accident, but by design, to systematically disadvantage the most vulnerable population in the United States. As a result of this alarming socioeconomic structure, education emerged as the universal solution to dismantle the inequalities and grow the economy of the United States. In the United States, education is marketed as a key component to social upward mobility, and current and prospective college students view higher education as attainable. However, during a global pandemic, this reality is weary. The Chronicle of Higher Education and several representatives of research institutions argue the novel coronavirus pandemic has the potential to disrupt higher education more than any other recession in the past. Consequently, this early warning has already unfolded.

The current pandemic threatens the national achievements of the United States higher education system[167] and forces students to make life-altering decisions based upon cost of attendance (COA), transportation, access to technology, food, and housing. COVID-19 also exacerbates the underlying income inequality and the stratification of the United States higher education system. Furthermore, these obstacles are disproportionally having crippling effects on first-generation, low-income, and other under-represented students. In order to understand the impact of this pandemic on the United States higher education system, this essay first tries to understand the present repercussions then hypothesizes about the underlying causes of these outcomes. Secondly, this essay reflects on methods to amend and strengthened the United States' higher education system.

The Costly Effect

The recognition of the historical inequalities deeply rooted in the United States propelled the efforts to redesign the United States higher education system, with a goal of widening opportunities for traditionally disadvantaged students to pursue a postsecondary degree. Nation-wide, institutions have closed facilities temporarily or permanently for the rest of the academic school year. At the end of March 2020, at least 1,102 colleges and universities have closed temporarily and moved to a digital platform, impacting over 14 million students.[168] Although, the closure of thousands of institutions was necessary to curtail the spread of the novel coronavirus pandemic, the socioeconomic implications disclose another story.

The pandemic uncovered the complexities of the stratification in the higher education system. In a matter of weeks, thousands of students became susceptible to homelessness, victims of the digital divides[169], and

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167 Today, more than 24 million students have access to higher standards preparing them for college than they did a few years ago. That includes approximately 4 million black students, 3.5 million Hispanic students, 2.8 million students with disabilities, and 1.5 million English learners. To see full list of the progress made in the United States Education System visit the following website: https://www.ed.gov/k-12reforms.

168 Hess, A. (2020). How Coronavirus Dramatically Changed College for Over 14 Million Students. Retrieved from https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/26/how-coronavirus-changed-college-for-over-14-million-students.html.

169 Merriam-Webster define the digital divide as the economic, educational, and social inequalities between those who have computers and online access and those who do not.

unemployed[170], posing a challenge to their 'place' in the higher education system. *How could a couple of weeks, reverse these vulnerable students' seemingly obtained privilege they acquired by pursuing a higher education?*[171] College was supposed to eliminate these inequalities and present new economic opportunities, but the pandemic has revealed these vulnerable students were never truly equal to their middle- and upper-class peers. This horror is the covert reality of the double standards in the United States higher education system at the expense of the low-income, first-generation, and other under-represented students.

Foreshadowing of the Effects Based Upon the Great Recession

Based on statistical changes observed in statistics in the 2020 *Indicators* report[172], the next few paragraphs hypothesize some of the long-term repercussions that students may face post-pandemic. During the Great Recession, undergraduate enrollment increased by nearly 2.5 million, jumping from 15.6 million in the fall of 2007 to a peak of 18.1 million in the fall of 2010.[173] The identified explanation of this upward trend is that it was due to an increase in unemployment which funneled many students to hide in school[174] and others to return to complete degrees or certificates.

While all families may experience an increase of financial pressure during economic turmoil, it disproportionately liquefies the amount of disposable income for low-income families who can barely afford the rising COA and usually have to incur debt to attend college. Equity Indicator 1a indicates from 2007 to 2012, the college participation rate for dependent 18- to 24-year-olds increased for all family income quartiles. However, for the lowest-income quartile,[175] the rate of college participation staggered around 41 percent from 2007 to 2009. Additionally, Equity Indicator 1a also demonstrates that low-income students did not reach an increase rate of college participation until 2010. Similarly, Equity Indicator 1i(ii) supports this pattern by estimating[176] low-income students' participation rates by state and nationally from 1998 to 2018. The estimation for college participation rate for students from low-income families between 2007 and 2011 were the following: 26 percent in 2008 and 2007, 27 percent in 2009, 34 percent in 2010, and 39 percent in 2011. Both Indicators 1a and 1i(ii) illuminate that an immediate increase in low-income student's college participation rates does not occur initially during a recession.

Evidently, this pandemic has the potential to further delay and stagger college participation rates for low-income students as well. Thus, a priority is needed to aid traditionally disadvantaged students.

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170 NBC News reported the United States had 26 million in job losses, equating to the entire job growth since the 2008 recession. To see full article visit the following website https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/u-s-jobless-claims-reach-26-million-coronavirus-hit-wiping-n1190296.

171 Attending or obtaining a postsecondary degree is a privilege in the United States, as it has widely become a prerequisite to occupational and social advancement.

172 Cautious is needed when examining historical trends, it is not a wholistic guide to interpreting the long-term consequences due to the coronavirus pandemic being an unapparelled event.

173 The Hechinger Report is dedicated to covering inequality and researching innovative solutions on how the United States education system can be improved. Barshay, J. (2020). How the 2008 Great Recession Affected Higher Education. Will History Repeat? Retrieved from https://hechingerreport.org/how-the-2008-great-recession-affected-higher-education-will-history-repeat/.

174 This phrase is used to describe how students felt they needed to continue their postsecondary education or receive vocational training to counteract the loss of jobs during a recession.

175 $43,063 and lower

176 Participation rates for low-income students are estimated based on: 1) public school enrollment figures; 2) percent of 4th to 9th graders nine years earlier that were approved for a Free or Reduced- Price Lunch 9 years earlier, and 3) number of dependent Pell Grant recipients from each state in a given year.

Low Income Students' Journey Ahead

The federal government, recognizing the power of education during the Great Recession, encouraged all United States citizens to go to school.[177] While the federal government was advocating for everyone to pursue a higher education, state support for higher education dropped and tuitions for several institutions surged to nearly 30 percent between 2007-08 and 2014-15, while median income fell 6.5 percent during the same period.[178] Pell Grant coverage related to Average College Costs continued to fall. Equity Indicator 3a(i) demonstrate further the stratification of higher education, showing that in 2017-2018, tuition for full-time undergraduate enrollment were 2.5 times higher in 2017-2018 than in 1974-75. In comparison, median family income of the United States households over 25 increased only 1.3 times (30 percent) between 1975 and 2017 with most of the increase occurring prior to 1999.

One of the biggest financial resources during the Great Recession was the Free Application for Federal Aid (FASFA) due to it having the potential to influence how low-income students participated in college enrollment. FASFA is the direct ticket to the federal Pell Grant, which although declining in the percent of costs covered saw an increase in the period of the Great Recession (See Equity Indicator 3b(i)). Many students heavily depend on FAFSA, but as of March 13, 2020, the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) reported a .7% decrease in FAFSA applications which equates to 10,000 applicants.[179] As a result, more of the burden will be on families and students at the same time that unemployment rates are growing. Equity Indicator 4b(ii) demonstrates that the net price[180] as percent of parents' family income has increased for everyone especially during the Great Recession, but it was higher for students in the lowest income quartile, reaching 94 percent of the percentage of average family income for those in the lowest quartile. As many students did not have the economic means to invest a sustainably amount of funds towards their education, borrowing increased.

The Hechinger Report indicates between 2007 and 2010, student loans increased by $22 billion, an historic record for annual college borrowing. Furthermore, the Hechinger Report also note that 2010 was also the year student loan debt surpassed credit card debt. Equity Indicator 4c(i) supports this claim displaying that loans for bachelor's degree completers increased from 51 percent in 1990 to 69 percent in 2016. With the foreshadowing challenges of this pandemic, EFC is also likely to decline, and low-income students will have to pick up the tab and take out additional loans to counteract income loss.

It must be noted that in the wake of the novel coronavirus pandemic, higher education institutions have been trying their best to accommodate all students, faculty, and staff, but it is unavoidable that some students will be left behind. According to Brookings, tuitions are the largest single revenue for both public and private institutions.[181] As a result, institutions are faced with the questions of increasing tuition costs to recover from the revenue loss, knowing that numerous families cannot afford this burden. The fate of higher education institutions is unclear, but what is clear is that the road to recovery is long and the aftermath of this pandemic will be felt

177 Barshay, J. (2020). How the Last Recession Affected Higher Education. Will History Repeat? Retrieved from https://hechingerreport.org/how-the-2008-great-recession-affected-higher-education-will-history-repeat/.

178 Friga, P. (2020). The Great Recession Was Bad for Higher Education. Coronavirus Could Be Worse. Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Great-Recession-Was-Bad/248317.

179 Daughterty, O. (2020). Decline in FAFSA Completions Could Spell Trouble as High School Seniors Finish Year From Home. Retrieved from https://www.nasfaa.org/news-item/21414/Decline_in_FAFSA_Completions_Could_Spell_Trouble_as_High_School_Seniors_Finish_Year_From_Home. See also Equity Indicator 4a(iv)).

180 The net price is the price that the student paid to attend their individual institution.

181 Startz, D. (2020). Coronavirus Poses Serious Financial Risks to US Universities. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/04/21/coronavirus-poses-serious-financial-risks-to-us-universities/.

decades later, unless systematic changes are made.[182]

The United States' Response and Action Plan

Since the novel coronavirus pandemic, there have been 4,234 higher education institutions impacted and 25,798,790 students affected.[183] Those statistics are alarming, and we must act now to protect the power of a higher education as a tool to mitigate inequalities. In response to the novel coronavirus pandemic, the United States has already injected 14 billion dollars to assist higher education institutions and students through the CARES Act. An estimated 90 percent of the funds are directly given to the institutions and 50 percent of this must be allotted for direct emergency aid for students.[184] However, flushing money out will not solve the cracks in our higher education systems. The CARES Act is a start, but it missed the opportunity to serve everyone, only truly assisting current and former students.

The novel coronavirus pandemic has shown us that low-income populations are bearing a disproportionate share of the impacts, as they are often on the front lines to provide care and essential services. COVID-19 dramatically shows us the impacts of inequality and that upward mobility for most low-income students is ever out of reach. This unprecedent event provides the United States higher education system the opportunity to be redesigned with a purpose as a universal instrument that not only mitigate these inequalities but serves everyone, not just the wealthy families. The discussion of the search for a more equitable system must be transformed into an action plan for the wellbeing of everyone and the sustainability of the power of education. However, this requires the inclusion of all players of the system and including those that have allowed the very problem to survive—students, funders, policymakers, community members, financial institutions, and education institutions. Until then, the United States higher education system is obstinate and will continue to mask its role in deepening inequalities or worst, possibly, crumble the next time around.

182 Seltzer, R. (2019). Public Higher Education Continues to Feel Pinch from Great Recession a Decade Later. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/06/05/public-higher-education-continues-feel-pinch-great-recession-decade-later.

183 Entangled. Solutions (2020). COVID-19: Higher Education Resource Center (H.E.R.C). Retrieved from https://www.entangled.solutions/.

184 Banerjee, A. (2020). How the CARES Act Supports Higher Education. Retrieved from https://www.clasp.org/blog/how-cares-act-supports-higher-education.