

# The Challenges Low-Income and Nontraditional Students Face During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has completely disrupted the lives of college students, especially low-income and nontraditional students, exacerbating higher education inequality. Low-income and nontraditional students are forced to cope with technical, financial, and emotional challenges during the pandemic. Although universities and the government have taken measures to provide relief, these efforts barely benefit underprivileged students. It is critical to raise awareness that underserved students are among the most severe victims of the COVID-19 crisis. There is a need for a call to action to address this problem.

**Key words:** pandemic, higher education, low-income students, nontraditional students

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## **Introduction**

At the end of 2019, COVID-19 cases started developing rapidly in China. COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus that may lead to severe upper-respiratory tract illnesses, posing a deadly threat to the infected. Due to high global mobility, COVID-19 spread quickly, and the first US case was reported in January 2020 in the state of Washington. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention became aware that the virus can spread from person to person, mainly through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The discovery that spread is more likely when people are in close contact with one another prompted state governments to temporarily restrict the openings of businesses and schools to contain the spread of the virus. A growing number of universities assembled emergency task forces to cope with the pandemic. Most universities began transitioning from in-person lectures to remote delivery in order to protect the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff. By mid-March, more than 1,100 colleges and universities in all 50 states have cancelled in-person classes or shifted to online-only instruction (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020).

The pandemic caused devastating financial losses to the higher education sector. Many universities and colleges lost projected ticket sales after the sudden cut of athletic seasons, and had to refund students for housing, dining, and parking. Higher education institutions across the nation are scrambling to close deep budget deficits and some have been pushed to the brink of collapse after the coronavirus outbreak triggered financial losses that could total more than \$100 million at some institutions (Binkley & Amy, 2020).

Students are abruptly required to leave campus and adapt to a new lifestyle. A recent study conducted by Arizona State University concludes that low-income students at the university were 55 percent more likely to delay graduation than their more affluent peers (Aucejo et al., 2020). According a recent *Inside Higher Ed* survey, university presidents are very worried about the success of low-income students during the pandemic (Lederman, 2020). The pandemic furthers educational inequity by posing technical, financial, and emotional challenges to low-income and nontraditional students.

### **Technical Challenges**

First, the problem with in-person to online transitions is that not all students are technically equipped to adapt to the change. Remote delivery of course materials requires the internet, a computer or a smart device, and technical knowledge to navigate the learning systems, which not every student has the luxury to possess, especially for low-income students who grew up in poverty and usually have few financial resources available. Although smartphones, computers, and laptops are ubiquitous at US universities, there still exists a digital divide with a large population of students not having access to reliable technology (Indiana University, 2018). Students from low-income households also lack the reliable internet connections they need to participate in online learning, which significantly hinders their ability to catch up with schoolwork.

For nontraditional students, such transition can be extremely daunting. Nontraditional students are defined as older students (mostly over 24 years old) who work full time, have children, and/or have other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Many nontraditional students also have a low-income background and work minimum wage jobs. These students not

only have limited access to technology, they may also lack adequate technical knowledge. Individuals who work in digitalized workplaces may be more digitally competent than previous generations due to their “digital native” status (Orlando & Attard, 2015; Prensky, 2001). Unlike their younger peers who tend to have fewer of these obstacles, some nontraditional students already find it difficult to keep up with course objectives attending face-to-face classes, let alone participating in learning remotely, compounding the learning gap.

### **Financial Challenges**

Second, the pandemic has had a devastating influence on our society, with more than 7.49 million Americans sickened by the virus,<sup>1</sup> and 33.5 million U.S. workers who have recently filed jobless claims.<sup>2</sup> Many nontraditional and low-income students who previously had to work either part- or full-time to support themselves and their loved ones lost their jobs. These students must balance the stress of schoolwork with the severe financial stress. In March this year, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, providing roughly \$14 billion higher education emergency relief funds to universities and colleges. The Act expanded unemployment insurance (UI) benefits to workers impacted by COVID-19 and substantially increased the amount of assistance provided. However, the assistance excludes millions of working adults and other non-traditional students.<sup>3</sup> Working college students are often left out of traditional unemployment insurance programs because they do not have sufficient work history, do not earn enough to qualify for the minimum benefits, or are enrolled as full-time students and are thus considered “unable and unavailable to work.” In nearly 20

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, assessed August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/>

<sup>2</sup> According to Forbes, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/terinaallen/2020/05/10/3-bitter-truths-about-the-coronavirus-job-losses-and-the-economy/#5256eb6c67f9>

<sup>3</sup> See subsequent guidance issued by the Department of Education, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/heerfstudentfaqs.pdf>

states, all part-time workers are ineligible for UI benefits regardless of their student status (National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2020). Many students find themselves in desperate situations after losing their jobs and being ineligible for government support.

### **Emotional Challenges**

Third, the COVID-19 outbreak has caused tremendous stress to college students due to the fear of themselves and their loved ones contracting the virus. Even before the pandemic, more college students suffered from mental illness than ever before (American Psychological Association, 2013). From 2007 to 2018, the percentage of students who struggled with moderate to severe depression increased from 23.2 percent to 41.1 percent; the percentage of students diagnosed with moderate to severe anxiety rose from 17.9 percent to 34.4 percent (Duff et al., 2019). Most colleges and universities have counseling centers that provide free and confidential services to students. However, many students are not able to use these services if they work full time and take evening classes, especially if they have jobs with inflexible leave policies. Many low-income and nontraditional students do not have adequate health insurance coverage for mental health care available through private agencies or off-campus providers (Bruce-Sanford & Soares, 2019). These types of students already have to cope with emotional stress during normal times, and the pandemic amplifies such difficulties. An April 2020 survey conducted by McKinsey & Company confirms that COVID-19 has caused considerable emotional disruption to college students. Among the student participants, 45 percent of them said that COVID-19 has had a strong or extremely strong impact on their emotional and mental preparedness, while 30 percent reported a strong or extremely strong impact on their ability to afford school (Kim et al., 2020).

Further, the closing of daycare centers and public schools means a great deal of emotional stress to student parents. According to new analysis of data from the 2018 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, more than one in five college students—or 22 percent of all undergraduates—are parents (US Department of Education, 2020). Of the 3.8 million students who are raising children while in college, roughly 2.7 million (70 percent) are mothers and 1.1 million (30 percent) are fathers (Cruse et al., 2019). A substantial portion of these student parents fit in either low-income or nontraditional categories, and sometimes both. Attending college while raising kids is already an incredibly difficult task. Such a burden becomes unthinkable during this pandemic when student parents have to cope with the closing of colleges, relocation from on-campus housing, transitions to online courses, potential or realized job losses, and attending to their children.

### **University and Government Efforts**

The pandemic has created a massive financial crisis for higher education institutions across the country as revenue from tuition and housing income plummets, student enrollments drop, and technology costs skyrocket. Institutions across the nation have had to spend staggering sums of money to support students through the pandemic, switch to online education, and issue refunds for parking and housing. For many public colleges, these costs alone are much higher than the federal funding they will receive or have already received from the CARES Act (Yuen, 2020). This problem will accelerate in the fall, as most state governments cut higher education funding. Inevitably, universities will have to increase tuition and fees to combat the deficit and survive financially, which can make college unaffordable for average American families, furthering disparities in college access.

Confronted with the financial crisis and the pandemic, higher education leaders are now facing difficult decisions about when to reopen campuses and how to go about it. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2020) tracked the fall 2020 plans from nearly 3,000 colleges. As of the end of August, over a quarter of them have decided to deliver classes primarily online, 22.5 percent of them are planning on returning to normal and offering in-person classes, 15 percent are proposing a hybrid model with a combination of in-person and online teaching, and six percent are planning for online classes only. The remainder of the schools are still undecided.

Many universities have taken further measures to protect the health of students, faculty, and staff by making mandates. First, classroom capacity has been reduced to ensure that students sit at least six feet apart from each other. Given that the virus spreads mainly among people who are in close contact for a prolonged period, enforcing physical distancing prevents individuals from inhaling droplets from the infected. Second, universities have issued face coverings policy requiring students, faculty, staff, and visitors to properly wear a face mask in buildings, in addition to maintaining six feet of social distancing. To allow for lip reading and for the easier projection of voice, many universities also provide faculty and staff with clear face shields. Lastly, universities have canceled fall break and plan to end in-person instruction by Thanksgiving (and continuing remotely after that time) because many college students tend to travel during breaks and holidays, which possibly exposes them to the coronavirus. Such measure prevents students from traveling and returning to campus en masse.

In addition to higher education institutions, the government has been taking legislative actions to battle the pandemic. Along with Congress's CARES Act, states have drafted over 60 bills related to postsecondary education and the COVID-19 pandemic (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). Most of these bills pertain to funding and emergency aid, conduct of

higher education, guidelines on student housing and meal plan refund, ways of coping with COVID-19 related disruptions, and public health and safety. For example, in early May, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan signed House Bill 187 (enacted under Article II, Section 17(c) of the Maryland Constitution - Chapter 98) mandating public higher education institutions to submit an outbreak response plan to the Maryland Department of Health on or before August 1 each year, beginning in 2021 (Maryland General Assembly, 2020). On June 11<sup>th</sup>, Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards signed Senate Bill 481 (later became Act No. 245) requiring postsecondary education management boards to adopt policies to address the negative impacts on students, faculty, and staff resulting from the public health emergency declared by the governor in response to the novel coronavirus (Louisiana State Legislature, 2020).

### **How Beneficial are These Efforts?**

Do these efforts benefit low-income and nontraditional students and help them cope with the challenges? The answer is: not so much. As indicated above, many low-income and nontraditional students face technical obstacles during the sudden transition from in-person to remote learning. Some universities reopening and providing face-to-face learning can help students who are technically inadequately equipped. However, students are expected to participate in virtual learning since the majority of higher education institutions plan on delivering some of the education remotely this fall. With the number of COVID-19 cases higher than in the spring, higher education institutions have increased online offerings and reduced in-person classes, leading to increased expectation for students to manage online learning.

Further, the financial and emotional challenges go beyond efforts enforced by universities and the government. Tens of millions of Americans have lost their jobs in the coronavirus recession, but for many of them the news is getting even worse: their positions are gone forever.



Nearly half of American families (47 percent) experiencing layoffs during the COVID-19 pandemic believe those jobs may never come back, according to a recent survey conducted by the University of Chicago (2020). The survey also reveals that 72 percent of Americans want their communities to prioritize restrictions to stem the spread of the coronavirus even at the expense of the economy, compared to 27 percent who prioritize reopening the economy.

Lastly, these efforts barely offer assurance to student parents. As the debate on whether daycare centers and public schools should reopen in the fall, student parents are anxiously waiting to determine what their life would look like when school starts. This year, many of the nation's largest school districts will delay the start of school or choose to open remotely, according to the *New York Times* (Nierenberg & Pasick, 2020). Public K-12 school closures and government orders mean that student parents have to find helpers or stay home with their children, which can disrupt schedules and childcare when they may also be facing uncertainty in employment and economic instability.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the pandemic has completely disrupted the lifestyle of college students, especially for low-income and nontraditional students, exacerbating higher education inequality. The sudden shift from in-person to remote learning and closing of businesses have revealed much about the struggles of low-income and nontraditional students. Success in college is not randomly distributed, with students from more privileged backgrounds retaining many advantages. Students with quiet and private places to study, reliable internet and learning equipment and less economically stressed home environments are more likely to excel in their educational performance. In the meantime, students from less privileged backgrounds are left with the lack of reliable technology, and unexpected financial and emotional stress. While there

are no easy solutions that will lead higher education to solve this crisis, we must admit that some serious actions must be taken to help these individuals who are forced to face exceptionally uncertain futures. Instead of focusing heavily on privileged students, higher education institutions and the government should engage in transforming their academic, social, and financial structures to foster success for low-income and nontraditional students.

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