Voices in Equity - Education Live w Dr. Adam Hollowell

**Adam:** Let's talk about three areas of focus in this chapter related to COVID and higher education. The first focus is on broader economic trends in higher education as the background to the pandemic. It is tempting to think of COVID as the most significant recent impact event on higher education. It is not; that would be the economic downturn of 2007 to 2009, otherwise known as the great recession.

The great recession transformed the economic landscape of higher education in the US and you simply cannot understand COVID and higher ed, unless you can understand the great recession and higher ed. So during the great recession state aid to public colleges and universities plummeted. In most states, spending per student adjusted for inflation remains well below pre-recession spending. So what that means is that states withdrew money from higher education during the great recession and that money never returned, or more precisely that money now comes from tuition.

So nationally the share of education revenues paid by students rose from 36% in 2008 to 47% in 2012, and during this time, the average public four year in-state tuition increased by 23%. Those are really big numbers. Across the country, state legislatures reduced the amount of funding that they were providing to institutions of higher education. The institutions of higher education raised tuition in order to balance their budgets.

In 2019, just before the pandemic hit, the us Forbes examined the financial health of 900 private colleges and universities and gave more than 600 of them, a C or D rating for their financial standing. So that's both public institutions and private institutions. When the Cares Act is passed in March, 2020, and it includes 14 billion for higher education, you should hear that 14 billion is not enough given the state of higher education before the pandemic.

So the American council on education estimated in 2020 that colleges and universities would need more than 120 billion to cover health related preparations, expected losses in revenue and emergency financial aid in the 2020, 2021 academic year alone. Additionally, the cares act did not support community colleges relative to their significance in the sector. Community colleges enroll 39% of all college students in the us, but community colleges received only 27% of Cares Act funds.

When we talk about higher education in the US, the image that pops into many people's minds is a campus environment, with residential students, with a four-year undergraduate experience, but 40% of enrolled students in higher education in the US are in community colleges. Our minds should go there first. Higher education was not in a strong financial place when COVID arrived and COVID made it much worse.

Okay. So our second focus in this chapter is vulnerable populations. By the end of March, 2020, over a thousand colleges and universities had closed their campuses due to coronavirus, immediately thrusting 14 million students into remote, online learning. That's a thousand institutions and 14 million students you'll remember from earlier, there are 4,000 institutions and 20 million students.

So that is a significant percentage of students enrolled in higher education whose campus is closed immediately, and they were shifted to online. This is a place where some of the existing research around online learning can help us understand what was likely happening during 2020 and 2021. Even as we wait for updated research from 2020, 2021 to become available.

In general students in online classes withdraw more often and earn lower grades than students in traditional classes. Academic retention and attainment are lower in online courses for populations that are academically disadvantaged already. Online students are more likely to drop out of college altogether as compared to students enrolled in, in person or hybrid courses.

So when you snap your fingers and overnight close the campus for 14 million students, it will have a predictable effect based on what we know about online courses already, which is that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will have a greater difficulty completing the courses and then completing their degrees.

We know that campus closures pushed students into a number of challenging situations, including food insecurity, financial stress, housing concerns, lack of resources to complete their academic. this is often expressed as internet access. So for instance, in 2019, 34% of Black Americans did not have high speed internet access at home compared to 21% of white Americans.

But that is only one part of the home resources that would be necessary to succeed in online courses. So for instance, a survey of 5,000 students across 17 HBCUs in June 20, found that the students were dealing with difficulties such as sick family members, worsening mental health, financial trouble, and stress from the pandemic, as well as visible anti-Black police violence in the killing of George Floyd in May and in March, the killing of Brianna Taylor.

Even in terms of health disparities. If you look specifically at the population that is most likely to be enrolled in college, The risk of death of COVID 19 among young adults was five to nine times higher among Black, Hispanic, and indigenous young people. So the population of college students, not all college students, but many college students were experiencing disproportionate health disparities due to COVID.

College students are also college workers now more than ever. In 1960, 25% of full-time college students worked while enrolled. Today over 70% of undergraduates work while enrolled. 20% of all undergraduate students are working full-time year-round and 43% of HBCU students rely on jobs to cover their basic living experiences.

You don't have a higher education experience of COVID and a frontline worker experience of COVID for 70% of students enrolled in college, they are both students and workers. So you have to understand those two things together.

Okay. Let's talk about faculty and staff beyond the students. Protections for faculty at colleges and universities were unevenly distributed along lines of race, gender, and tenure track faculty are disproportionately white and male while adjuncts are disproportionately women and non-white. At this point in higher education, nearly three fourths of all teaching jobs are not tenure eligible and non-tenure track positions often have lower wages, fewer benefits and little job security. So within the faculty ranks, you have an uneven distribution of protections.

And then there are campus staff who may simply have been laid off with campus closures. Or who were forced to work in frontline positions when campuses reopened. For instance, Florida state university announced a policy that staff could lose their right to work from home if they were discovered to be simultaneously caring for children or other dependents, that policy applied to university staff, but not to faculty.

The third focus was social mobility, college as an engine of social mobility. Since 1980, the cost of four-year public and private colleges and universities has nearly tripled after accounting for inflation, federal Pell grants once covered a significant percentage of these costs around 80% of the cost of a four-year public college degree for students from working families.

But today Pell grants cover closer to 30% of the cost. According to the Department of Education, nearly a third of Americans, outstanding college debts have debt, but no degree, often because the borrowing abilities that the students had couldn't keep pace with the rising cost of college. Stratification is particularly drastic at top tier private research universities, like Duke University.

In 2017, the New York Times reported that 38 of the top colleges in the US enrolled more students from households in the top 1% of household income in the US, then from households in the bottom, 60% of household income in the US, and even access to federal Pell grants and institutional financial aid, low-income students have a higher likelihood of borrowing money to pay for college than their peers.

Debt is particularly prevalent among Black students, in 2016, 85% of black graduates across all higher education institutions, graduated with debt compared to just 70% of white peers. The amount of debt that is going to come from 70% of white graduates and 85% of Black graduates graduating with debt is astronomical. So it is both disproportionate debt falling on Black Americans and unreasonable debt falling on all Americans.

Okay here, we also have to talk directly about for-profit colleges and universities, which contribute significantly to education debt burden in the us as. Tressie McMillan Cottom describes in her book, Lower Ed for profit colleges and universities are organized to commodify social inequalities. Here again, the great recession provides important context for COVID, during the great recession enrollment at for profit colleges climbed 24%.

One reason for this jump is that the parent companies of for-profit colleges often have considerable cash reserves to bolster marketing and student retention services during economic downturns, unlike many smaller private schools with little to no endowment or public schools that are subject to state budget.

So for-profit entities can ramp up advertising and solicitations during economic downturns, which is going to lead to increased. For instance, the New York times reported that a for profit Ashford University had hired 200 new enrollment advisors in summer 2020.

Let's talk about ideas for reform. The most immediate proposal for countering the impact of COVID on students in higher educational institutions would be to double the maximum Pell grant award and to make community college free.

One of the major interventions that would be helpful is for universities to find ways to increase support services for remote students. So if we were to make a list of the kinds of student support services that are documented to help students complete their degrees, we would be talking about things like counseling and psychological services, student health services, financial services, academic support services.

And if I were to ask you where those services are on this campus, you would give me a list of buildings, counseling and psychological services in this building, financial support services in this is in this building student health services is in this. When campuses closed those services became unavailable to people or only available remotely.

And one of the things that colleges and universities can do in the decades ahead is to find creative ways to make sure that those support services are available to remote students, as well as in person students. So that it's not just a building you go to, if you need counseling and psychological services, but a website and an online program.

In this vein colleges and universities should increase anti-poverty programs for students. So we do often think of colleges and universities as providing certain kinds of financial advice to their students. So if you want help completing your FAFSA form from your college and university, they will help you do that.

Sarah Goldrick-Rab has also proposed that colleges and universities should help students apply for federal unemployment insurance, snap programs, and other federal programs that students would be eligible for, but may not know how to navigate the systems. So if the college is helping you apply for FAFSA, why not also have the college help you apply for snap? If you're eligible for snap.

Now, again, that forces us to shift away from the campus-based model of four-year students who have housing and fully paid tuition. We've got to shift our minds to students who may already be economically vulnerable, may already be working, may already be involved in a whole range of social support services that the college could help them access.

Colleges and universities should rethink their standards for student academic work and faculty research and service work. This is a moment for us to reimagine course design and work expectations for faculty, to address questions of equitable access, not only for disabled students or students who may not be able to participate remotely, but also for students who may face periodic interruptions to health, internet access, or other on campus resources.

How many of you during your time in school remotely during COVID had an instructor who made some kind of accommodation to the kind of work that demonstrated your learning? And was that accommodation a detriment to your learning or an asset to your learning? How can colleges and universities rethink the way they do assessments for students and for faculty to push those assessments toward greater equity, toward greater understanding of individuals who face periodic interruptions to labor and toward greater accessibility for disabled students, staff and faculty.

When we think about the decades ahead, targeted support for Black, Hispanic, and native students is absolutely crucial. Gregory Price recommended in 2020 that a stimulus package could provide a thousand dollars to the institution for every enrolled student in an HBCU per academic. Another group of leaders from minority serving institutions called for federal investment of 10 billion in HBCUs, TCUs, HSIs, and PBIs.

One of the ways that the federal government could infuse more institutional resources into minority serving institutions is through research. So of the 5.6 billion fiscal year 2017 expenditures for federal research funding from the national science foundation, the NSF, less than one fourth of 1% went to tribal colleges and universities. That's about 13.8 million. Of all federal spending on research and development in fiscal year 2018, HBCUs received 400.4 million only 0.67% of total federal spending.

That means that a very low percentage of NSF and NIH dollars and IAS dollars are going to TCUs, HBCUs and HSIs. Even if the federal government set a threshold of 15% or 10% of all funding on research and development to go to MSIs, the net investment at 15% would be 6.5 billion in funding.

Whatever colleges and universities will look like in the years and decades to come. The moral demand for racial justice is clear colleges and universities must center the health and safety of black students, staff and faculty, prioritize social mobility through equitable and debt free access to higher education, and abandon the commitment to hierarchy and inequality that has characterized so much of higher education's past.

**Student:** my name is Vance. I'm studying, uh, economics and environmental science. I'm a current senior. And so my question was obviously, um, public schools are so reliant on state funding. Like I know in your chapter, you talked about how the UNC system is having their budget slash so do you think it's gonna be easier or harder for public schools to implement these policies and say a big private school with a large endowment, like Duke.

**Adam:** So state institutions are negotiating with state political officials, but it doesn't necessarily mean that private schools have it easy when thinking about finances. So one of the things that you can look at, based on the entire budget of the school what percentage of the budget goes to student services? And that can give you a sense of how an institution is allocating its dollars.

And it doesn't necessarily mean that because you're at a private school that has access to an endowment that the university spends more of its budget on student services. It could mean that, but it could also not mean that. I do think that the trend of state level disinvestment in public higher education institutions will either have to change or tuition will continue to go up.

It's what we've seen over the last 20 years is that if the state cuts the money that it's giving to the education institutions, the institution is not going to accept fewer student. It is not going to downshift its programs. It is only going to increase tuition. And so those two things are pinned to one another. And if, if tuition is gonna drop for public colleges and universities, it is going have to come from greater state investment.

What you're seeing now through the federal interventions. In student loan debt is an attempt to provide a federal solution to something that is decided at the state level. If the state continues disinvesting in higher education, there's only so much the federal government can do to try to intervene on rising tuition costs because the tuition costs are linked to the state, not to the federal government. And so one of the challenges is if the federal government is addressing student debt but the state is disinvesting in a way that continues to make tuition costs rise. Then debt's just gonna continue to rise.

In some ways, private schools sidestep that challenge because they are not directly responsible to state governments, but in other ways, private schools are responsible to a variety of stakeholders. And oftentimes when we think of private schools, we think of large endowments that really is a relatively small number of private schools. Most private colleges and universities do not have large endowments and therefore don't have the kind of financial flexibility that you might associate with Harvard or Yale or Princeton or something like that.

**Student:** My name is Rohan. I'm studying economics and public policy. And my question was, it seemed like a lot of, at least the scope of this chapter focused on physical health of students and perhaps, um, how that, uh, experience of downturn during COVID. Was there any data or research done on like perhaps mental health, um, and perhaps disparities there and how I know Duke and UNC CAPS were already had pretty horrible infrastructure, but like during COVID was slammed with like an uptick in, uh, I guess appointments.

And they obviously didn't have the infrastructure to deal with it before, so they couldn't deal with it during COVID. So if there was any sort research or data done on that. And, or perhaps if you were to include that in the scope of like a future chapter?

**Adam:** In some ways the response by counseling and psychological services was quote unquote easier than the response of student health services, because it's easier to provide telemedicine for counseling and psychological services that it is for say a checkup. So I do think that colleges and universities pivoted their counseling and psychological services online much more quickly than they pivoted their health services online, their physical health services online.

I also think that the pandemic revealed the usefulness of the ability of college aged students to stay on their parents' health insurance until 26. So for many students, they were eligible to buy health insurance through their universities, and they were eligible to stay on their parents' health insurance through age 26. Most schools require you to have a health insurance plan to live on campus. If we're talking about campus-based schools. And so the fact that many students had at least two options for how to secure those health services means that there wasn't the same drop in levels of health insurance care that we might expect for the population at large for people under 26.

So in some ways, colleges and universities were completely unprepared for the campus closures and what that would do to student services in other ways, because there was this backstop of being able to be on your parents' health insurance until 26. The rates of loss of insurance among 18- to 22-year-olds was much lower than you might think.

Part of your question was about, is there research out there? the. Answer to that is almost always, yes. The question is whether I know that research. Everything that's in the chapter is what I know, and, uh, there's nothing I know that's not in the chapter around that. The trickiness of psychological services during the pandemic is its own is a whole, we could have written a chapter, an entire chapter on that.

**Student:** Hi, my name is Michael. I'm a senior studying economics and public policy. You've spent a considerable amount of time talking about kind of inequality issues for students who are already in college or higher ed, and I was wondering if you are seeing the COVID impact exaggerating uh, in qualities in admissions and maybe in middle and high school as well, and how that plays a role, uh, in connection with higher ed.

**Adam:** So there is a chapter in the book on K through 12 education. As I'm sure most of, you know, there were increased deferrals. There were increased gap years. There were increased admissions off the wait list because of those deferrals in gap years. So it does seem that COVID threw some complications onto admissions. It's also true that admissions data is very heavily protected. And so it's difficult to get clear and accurate information about what colleges and universities did around admissions during COVID.

There was a lawsuit at Harvard a few years before COVID that led to some admissions data being put into the public record because it was admitted into the court for the lawsuit. And that produced a lot of really interesting findings around admission, but we haven't had any, we haven't had any lawsuits that required anyone to submit their admissions data during COVID that would bring some of that information out. But admissions officers are notoriously difficult to get clear information from.

**Student:** So hi, I'm, uh, really I'm a graduate student in economics. So, uh, I'm wondering, like, as we are doing research in the COVID and also the higher education, do we have some like commonly used data set or is there any like research method that we could apply in this context? Like during the pandemic, any pandemic related data set?

**Adam:** Yeah. So institutions of higher education in the us are federally required to submit data. But often those submissions are on a two- or three-year lag from the year that the data is required. So there are federal data sets around things like retention rates, completion of degree within six years of enroll of first enrollment, incoming students by transfer, outgoing students by transfer racial and gender demographic of enrolled students.

So those data are available federally. There were extensions on the submission of those data that were offered to universities during COVID because again, institutions were reeling, but you can find federally released education data for the entire sector. There are similar collection efforts in other areas there's federally collected economic data, there's federally collected health data,

But the other thing that comes to mind is I mentioned earlier the American College Health Association, any of the kind of national umbrella organizations that link to, all the colleges and universities were able or groups like that were able to collect data nationally in a way that didn't necessarily, there's a lot of sort of sporadic data collected here and there with an interview with 20 people or a conversation with 500 focus groups or whatever, but the big data was either collected federally or was collected by national organizations that were able to do a large effort like the American college health association, things like that.

So you can look at those national organizations in other sectors to find data that’s available. Yeah. Thank you. Yeah.

**Student:** So one student asked, why do you think SAT and ACT test should be. If it's because of the costs of taking those tests are expensive, can we lower them? I'm just concerned that if SAT and ACT tests became optional, some poor minority students who can't afford to attend all of those extracurricular activities that top universities value a lot will lose their only chance to take the standardized test and show their academic potential.

Wouldn't this policy, uh, end up letting students from rich families get into top universities easier?

**Adam:** The data suggests that rich students are already getting into top universities fairly easily, which is not the same as saying that the students who get into those universities were lazy in high school, or didn't actually have the GPA that they had, or didn't actually have the SAT score that they had.

Right? I'm not actually calling the students. I'm not saying it was easy for the students to be admitted. I'm saying that the data suggests that, as I mentioned earlier, at 38 of the top colleges in the US, there were more students from the top 1% of household income than from the bottom 60% of household income. So in terms of numbers, rich families are not having a particularly difficult time getting into elite universities.

The question is about SAT, ACT, and on the one hand. Yes. If you drop ACT SAT requirements, the weighting of other aspects of an application will go up. If there's a weighted percentage for SAT, ACT, and then that becomes op optional, that weight is gonna have to be distributed to some other part of the application.

And there are concerns about that. I mean, recommendation letters will privilege certain subgroups of students, GPA will privilege certain subgroups of students, extracurricular activities will privilege certain subgroups of students, but there's also nothing to keep college admissions officers from changing how they understand those other categories.

So I'll give you a concrete example. We often think of extracurricular activities as volunteering service volunteering. Service volunteering often assumes a position of financial stability. If you have time to go downtown to the public library and read books at the afternoon childcare program, you are probably not in a house that is food insecure, because if you were, you would get a job or you would be working or you would be cooking or you would be doing whatever your family needed.

Now there's nothing to keep college admissions from reading a whole range of activities. Under the heading of extracurricular activities. Working a part-time job could be an extracurricular activity, taking care of somebody in your household, whether it's an older adult or a younger sibling who needs care can be an extracurricular activity.

There's a whole range of things you could classify as extracurricular activities. The old model would be to call that community service, the new model would be to think of that in a way that doesn't privilege people who are coming from stronger financial position.

So the question is specifically about SAT, ACT because in the chapter we say the suspension of required SAT, ACT during the pandemic should be continued. I, I do think that's true, but I also think that in order to continue that suspension colleges and universities have to make deliberate choices about how they read the rest of the application in order to balance out the equity of their admissions.

There's also a temptation in this question to be thinking of elite schools as representative of higher education as a whole. And again, 40% of students enrolling in higher ed from high school are enrolling in community college. And so how do you create equitable outcomes for that group of people is going to have a much broader social impact than the narrow margin between getting in or not getting in to one of a handful of elite colleges and universities based on SAT, ACT score or extracurricular activities.

**Student:** You mentioned that federal regulations must keep the predatory operations of for-profit colleges in check. Can you explain more about it? And what specific steps do you think the fed should take?

**Adam:** The first thing I would say is that I highly recommend Tressie McMillan Cottom's book, Lower Ed. It gives you a very clear picture of the for-profit institutional landscape, and takes seriously the realities of student experiences within for-profit colleges and universities. There's a little bit of back and forth in how the federal government relates to for-profit colleges and universities, because depending on which party is in office for-profit colleges and universities can get a boon or they can ha experience regulation. So for instance, I mentioned earlier that the Cares Act did not give proportionate funding to community colleges. The Cares Act gave disproportionate funding to for-profit colleges and universities.

So for-profit colleges and universities do work for some students in some circumstances, for-profit colleges and universities also have the resources and the institutional standing to operate in predatory ways on students who don’t know how difficult it will be to get a job after they've taken out the debt to complete their college degree. So we have this narrative in the us that you need a college degree to get a job, but that narrative does not account for the fact that not all college degrees are equal on the job market and not all jobs pay enough to cover your student loans.

This is partly why they; the Biden administration is moving to pin the amount that you pay on your student loans to your discretionary income. It seems clear that if the Biden administration forgives student loans, it will be very, very difficult to then reinstate for a future administration to reinstate those loans.

But if the Biden administration pins the amount that you pay on your student loan to your discretionary income, that's something that is much easier for a future administration to undo because it's an ongoing policy, not something that happens once. And so for-profit colleges and universities may experience increased federal support in soliciting more students and signing up more students, which can have the effect of significantly increasing the amount of student debt in the country or for-profit colleges and universities may face federal regulations that restrict the amount of students that they can enroll based on how many students are completing their degrees.

So if you have universities with extremely low graduation rates, it's essentially a debt factory, not a degree factory, and the federal government can impose regulations to try to hold for-profit universities accountable for that kind of enrollment behavior. But that very much depends on which federal administration is either supporting or regulating for-profit colleges and universities.