

The Truth About What Happens Next for Colleges

Howard University and the UC system are returning to “hybrid” teaching, bringing some students back to campus. Their leaders explain their plans.

ADAM HARRIS JULY 12, 2020



ANNA WEBBER / MANDEL NGAN / GETTY / THE ATLANTIC

IN THE ABSENCE OF clear federal guidance, the fall semester’s layout varies widely from campus to campus. Some institutions, such as the California State University system and Hampton University, have made the decision to keep students online and campuses closed. Other colleges, such as Harvard, have opted for a hybrid model—holding classes online but bringing some students

back to live on campus.

On Wednesday, at an Atlantic LIVE event, I spoke with Janet Napolitano, the president of the University of California, and Wayne Frederick, the president of Howard University, about how their respective schools are approaching the fall semester, and how—if necessary—they might abort their plans and move back online. The conversation that follows has been condensed for length and clarity. The full interview can be [viewed here](#).

Adam Harris: What will the fall look like?

Janet Napolitano: It turns out that reopening a campus is much more complicated than shutting it down, as we did last spring. The UC system has 10 campuses spread throughout California, and they're in different environments. We have campuses in a small rural community in Merced, and campuses in large urban areas—the Bay Area, Los Angeles, San Diego. And so we have to evaluate circumstances of each campus differently in their context. What is the actual virus presence in that area? What is the local health guidance that the campus needs to follow? Our overall approach was to develop a common threshold of safety standards that campuses needed to meet for testing, for tracing, for quarantining, for social distancing, for masking, and then beyond that, to build for the fall. Most of our campuses will be hybrid. They will have some in-person classes and laboratories, and much instruction will remain online. We're still grappling with things like extracurriculars and how to manage those. And these plans, once issued, are iterative: They're going to be flexible. They're going to need to change and evolve with

the changing circumstances, and we're going to need to be very agile and nimble in dealing with those circumstances.

Harris: President Frederick, what does the fall look like at a 10,000-student campus like Howard?

Wayne Frederick: We are certainly going to de-densify the campus. We don't anticipate all 10,000 students will be back. We have given students the option to have their classes online, so we are planning for a hybrid environment. Howard is unique in that we hire more and employ more African American faculty than any other single higher-ed institution in America, and because of the disproportionate impact of this virus on African Americans, we have a higher moral obligation to make sure that we do this safely as well. We are really going to be aggressive about testing, contact tracing, making sure social distancing and those things are taking place.

We have a hospital on our campus, and a medical school, so we're going to use those resources wisely to also assist in making sure that health and safety comes first. We have places to quarantine. But I want to underscore that the ultimate thing that's going to make this work is personal responsibility and accountability. And while I think sometimes we are cynical about our young people, I'm not. I'm extremely optimistic about them. They are the most altruistic generation of the five or six generations that exist today. And I think that if we trust in them and we give them guidelines, they'll step up and perform.

[*Read: [Why America needs its HBCUs](#)]*

Harris: We heard from some students why they are excited to return

to campus, but also heard from others why they are worried about returning. Dr. Frederick, as a medical professional, how do you allay some of those fears? How do you create a safe enough environment and also convince students that, yes, this is a safe environment to return to?

Frederick: I myself, I'm at risk. I have sickle cell [anemia] and I'm a type 1 diabetic. And so the first thing that I've tried to do is to communicate my own experience and to let students know that you can navigate safely if you really adhere to certain guidelines. The second thing is, we have to involve and engage them in the process. They know what they do, for instance in residence halls, so we have to figure out a way to still get them to have some of those interactions, but to convince them how to do it. And the third and last thing that I have been trying to communicate in my messages is about the communal good, and making sure that we look at it through every lens: The responsibility that we have as an institution that primarily serves African American students in a country that is in an economic recession, in keeping our full complement employed, is a high bar. So we have to look at how we keep them safe, getting them out into the workforce to diversify different fields.

Harris: International students also make up a large percentage of your populations. Immigration and Customs Enforcement announced that these students would have to leave the country or risk deportation if their universities were to switch to online courses. How has that change affected your decision making?

Napolitano: ICE's announcement this week was really quite misguided and devastating. It was ICE's attempt to force campuses

to reopen as part of the administration's push to get everybody back to school, but it ignored the significant impact on campuses and our need to be able to adapt our curriculum to the health circumstances that we exist in. The University of California is a talent magnet from around the world. Discouraging international students, which has been happening over the course of the year—it's been more and more difficult to get visas, to get appointments for interviews for visas—and then to have this kind of plopped on us right before the beginning of the academic year, in my view, not only is misguided, but it was done improperly and illegally, and the University of California is considering its own response, and that could include actual litigation as well.

Harris: One of the most pressing questions that people ask me on a pretty frequent basis is “How do you police student conduct?” You were saying that you have to put a lot of faith in students to adhere to some of the social-distancing guidelines. But what happens if a student doesn't do that?

Napolitano: The first thing is to involve students in the creation of the conduct expectations. And then to educate and emphasize with students that this is not only about their conduct, but the health of the community in which they exist. If there are students who perpetually violate the rules on social distancing and masking, for example, then the normal student-conduct approaches need to be made for discipline, but I think we begin with communication and education.

Frederick: It's obviously complicated and difficult. The student leadership—I've spoken to them about them doing their own self-

policing. If they step up to the plate and they really engage and interact with their peers directly, that's going to be helpful. We've considered everything from having everyone sign a waiver to having people sign a pledge. I have felt strongly that we need to publish a pledge but not necessarily have people sign it. We have to engage our community in an all-for-one type of attitude.

Napolitano: Universities can lead by example here, and can demonstrate to the community, to the country at large, how you really manage a public-health crisis, and how everybody has a role to play.

[Read: [The real lesson of college closures](#)]

Harris: To that point, there's been a range of decisions that universities have made. Hampton University in Virginia said that all of its classes will be online and it won't have students return; Cal State has said that it'll have online-only classes for the most part, but universities have arrived at different conclusions. How do you avoid messiness in communicating different messages to your communities?

Frederick: You make a good point. And you have to look at your circumstances. At Howard we have about 6 to 7 percent of international students. And I myself first came to the U.S. as an international student on an F-1 visa. [ICE's decision] is both personal and extremely traumatic for what students may experience. There are lots of reasons for students to be in the country, while they get the education. As I tell most of my students, 20 percent of what happens for you happens in the classroom, but 80 percent of your good happens outside of the classroom with lots of other

engagement that you have. And so I think, along those same lines, each of us has a responsibility to describe the uniqueness of our institutions. As President Napolitano said, we have to lead and demonstrate to the country and our universities can be beacons of solutions. I think we have to provide that, and the messaging is going to get messy because we all are different.

Harris: What happens if you have a surge on campus? Is there a fail-safe? Is there a point where you switch to online-only teaching if your campus becomes a hot spot?

Napolitano: Yes. As part of our planning, what would be the trigger for resuming total online, as opposed to hybrid, what would we need to see? That's why the ability to do testing and tracing is so, so important. You want to be able to identify an incipient outbreak, before it becomes a major outbreak. So, yes, we all have plans for if we have to go to a shutdown. And that really affects not only instruction, but the occupancy of the dorms. Because you could have students coming back, although they'll probably be in singles, not doubles or triples, but for students living in the dorms, you could have kind of a boomerang impact and we need to set the stage and make sure that students are prepared to be flexible.

Frederick: It's important for us to have that contingency plan. What I'm hoping, though, is that we would have robust enough plans that either prevent or contain such a situation because we are getting to a point in the country where there has to be some acceptance that this is with us, and we have to figure out how to contain it and control it as best as possible. As we make the decision to bring people on campus, everything from de-densifying to having spaces where we

can quarantine students, how to contact trace and follow them, is all part of that mitigation. One critical part of our plan is to try to keep everyone who is high-risk off the campus. You just don't want one of those people to get infected, and if we start with that as a baseline, and you simply limit the exposure and manage that risk, I think that could put us on a road to success.

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