

Opinion

# College Campuses Must Reopen in the Fall. Here's How We Do It.

It won't be easy, but there's a path to get students back on track. Higher education will crumble without it.

By **Christina Paxson**  
Ms. Paxson is the president of Brown University.

April 26, 2020, 10:12 a.m. ET



Dalbert Vilarino

Across the country, college campuses have become ghost towns. Students and professors are hunkered down inside, teaching and learning online. University administrators are tabulating the financial costs of the Covid-19 pandemic, [which already exceed](#) the CARES Act's support for higher education.

The toll of this pandemic is high and will continue to rise. But another crisis looms for students, higher education and the economy if colleges and universities cannot reopen their campuses in the fall.

As amazing as videoconferencing technology has become, students face financial, practical and psychological barriers as they try to learn remotely. This is especially true for lower-income students who may not have reliable internet access or private spaces in which to study. If they can't come back to campus, some students may choose — or be forced by circumstances — to forgo starting college or delay completing their degrees.

The extent of the crisis in higher education will become evident in September. The basic business model for most colleges and universities is simple — tuition comes due twice a year at the beginning of each semester. Most colleges and universities are tuition dependent. Remaining closed in the fall means losing as much as half of our revenue.

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This loss, only a part of which might be recouped through online courses, would be catastrophic, especially for the many institutions that were in precarious financial positions before the pandemic. It's not a question of whether institutions will be forced to permanently close, it's how many.

Higher education is also important to the U.S. economy. The sector employs about [three million people](#) and as recently as the 2017-18 school year pumped more than [\\$600 billion of spending](#) into the national gross domestic product. Colleges and universities are some of the most stable employers in municipalities and states. Our missions of education and research drive innovation, advance technology and support economic development. The spread of education, including college and graduate education, enables upward mobility and is an essential contributor to the upward march of living standards in the United States and around the world.

The reopening of college and university campuses in the fall should be a national priority. Institutions should develop public health plans now that build on three basic elements of controlling the spread of infection: test, trace and separate.

These plans must be based on the reality that there will be upticks or resurgences in infection until a vaccine is developed, even after we succeed in flattening the curve. We can't simply send students home and shift to remote learning every time this happens. Colleges and universities must be able to safely handle the possibility of infection on campus while maintaining the continuity of their core academic functions.

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They must also be sensitive to the particular challenge of controlling the spread of disease on a college campus. A typical dormitory has shared living and study spaces. A traditional lecture hall is not conducive to social distancing. Neither are college parties, to say the least. We must take particular care to prevent and control infection in this environment.

Although a vast majority of residential college students will experience only mild symptoms if they contract the coronavirus, students regularly interact with individuals on and off campus who are at high risk of severe illness, or worse. Administrators should be concerned not only for the students in their charge, but also for the broader community they interact with.

I am cautiously optimistic that campuses can reopen in the fall, but only if careful planning is done now. Fortunately, evidence-based public health protocols for the control of infectious disease have been known for decades. They can be applied to college campuses provided the right resources are in place and administrators are willing to make bold changes to how they manage their campuses.

Testing is an absolute prerequisite. All campuses must be able to conduct rapid testing for the coronavirus for all students, when they first arrive on campus and at regular intervals throughout the year. Testing only those with symptoms will not be sufficient. We now know that many people who have the disease are asymptomatic. Regular testing is the only way to prevent the disease from spreading silently through dormitories and classrooms.

Traditional contact tracing is not sufficient on a college campus, where students may not know who they sat next to in a lecture or attended a party with. Digital technology can help. Several states are working to [adapt mobile apps](#) created by private companies to trace the spread of disease, and colleges and universities can play a role by collaborating with their state health departments and rolling out tracing technology on their campuses.

Testing and tracing will be useful only if students who are ill or who have been exposed to the virus can be separated from others. Traditional dormitories with shared bedrooms and bathrooms are not adequate. Setting aside appropriate spaces for isolation and quarantine (e.g. hotel rooms) may be costly, but necessary. It will also be necessary to ensure that students abide by the rigorous requirements of isolation and quarantine.

Aggressive testing, technology-enabled contact tracing and requirements for isolation and quarantine are likely to raise concerns about threats to civil liberty, an ideal that is rightly prized on college campuses. Administrators, faculty and students will have to grapple with whether the benefits of a heavy-handed approach to public health are worth it. In my view, if this is what it takes to safely reopen our campuses, and provided that students' privacy is scrupulously protected, it is worthwhile.

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Our students will have to understand that until a vaccine is developed, campus life will be different. Students and employees may have to wear masks on campus. Large lecture classes may remain online even after campuses open. Traditional aspects of collegiate life — athletic competitions, concerts and yes, parties — may occur, but in much different fashions. Imagine athletics events taking place in empty stadiums, recital halls with patrons spaced rows apart and virtual social activities replacing parties.

But students will still benefit from all that makes in-person education so valuable: the fierce intellectual debates that just aren't the same on Zoom, the research opportunities in university laboratories and libraries and the personal interactions among students with different perspectives and life experiences.

Taking these necessary steps will be difficult and costly, and it will force institutions to innovate as we have never done before. But colleges and universities are up to the challenge. Campuses were among the first to shutter during the Covid-19 pandemic. The rapid response that occurred across the country stemmed from our concern for the health of our students and communities, and our recognition that college campuses pose special challenges for addressing infectious disease.

Our duty now is to marshal the resources and expertise to make it possible to reopen our campuses, safely, as soon as possible. Our students, and our local economies, depend on it.

Christina Paxson is the president and a professor of economics and public policy at Brown University, deputy chair of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's board of directors and vice chair of the Association of American Universities.

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