

How Will the Pandemic Change Higher Education?

Professors, administrators, and staff on what the coronavirus
will leave in its wake.

Chronicle contributors

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Contents

Liquidity, Liquidity, Liquidity	3
More Than Bricks and Mortar	4
Town-Gown, Gone	4
The Fantasy of Resistance	5
Together, at Last	6
Winners and Losers	7
No More ‘Normal’	8
Bad Sports	9
Place Matters	10
We Are All Ungraders Now	11
Build Something Better	12
Things Fall Apart	13
A Test of Infrastructure	14
Freezing to Death	15
The End of Esotericism	16
Make the Most of a Natural Experiment	17
Beyond Survival Strategies	18
The Purpose of Our Profession Is at Risk	19
Hope Among the Ruins	20
Real College for Real Students	21
Cleaning Empty Buildings	22
Publishing in a Pandemic	23
After the University	24

The coronavirus crisis has — in what seems like an instant — upended much of modern life, and higher education has not been spared. Campuses are closed, courses moved online, commencements canceled. Uncertainty and fear cloud the future. In the short term, students scramble to figure out their fall plans, the faculty faces hiring freezes, and administrators debate once-unimaginable options, like whether to declare financial exigency.

The pandemic might also permanently change the character of higher learning in America — its culture, its role in society and in the economy, and the business models that sustain it.

With this in mind, we reached out to college staff members, professors, and administrators with a straightforward question: How will the coronavirus change higher education? Here's what they told us.

Liquidity, Liquidity, Liquidity

Colleges will cut costs and scale back risky growth strategies.

By Robert Kelchen

Previous financial shocks have generally hit colleges on either the revenue or the expenditure sides of the ledger, but the coronavirus pandemic has hit both, simultaneously. Revenue from facilities rentals, campus bookstores, dining facilities, and parking tickets has dried up, while new expenditures are required for room-and-board refunds and putting classes online.

Colleges are already curtailing as much spending as possible. Hiring freezes are quickly becoming the norm, with salary freezes, furloughs, and layoffs likely to follow. Cost-cutting will continue for at least one or two years postcrisis, as colleges try to get back on stronger financial footing. Such efforts could continue even longer.

One long-term result of this crisis will be a priority on financial flexibility. Many colleges were already concerned about an anticipated decline in the number of high-school graduates. Governing boards, many of which are already skeptical of the value of tenured faculty and the traditional structure of academic programs, are going to require colleges to shift further toward hiring non-tenure-track faculty members and requiring more programs to pass a return-on-investment test.

Finally, prioritizing financial liquidity may lead colleges to reconsider ambitious plans to grow their way out of budgetary challenges. In the pre-2020 competitive marketplace, proposing large expansions was already a risky proposition. In a post-coronavirus world, colleges will tighten their belts and avoid unnecessary risks.

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More Than Bricks and Mortar

We can — and must — replicate online the vibrancy of campus life.

By Joseph E. Aoun

American higher education is built on a residential model that is the envy of the world. Students learn in classrooms, outside of class in myriad social settings, and off campus through internships, community service, and other experiential opportunities.

Now that model is in limbo, threatened by a global pandemic. Millions of students have had their college experience abruptly reduced to the size of their computer screens.

But as with most disruptive events, this one brings opportunity. The institutions that will thrive in the future will be the ones that embrace online platforms, not just a hastily assembled, short-term replacement for classes, but long-term expansions of classroom instruction, campus life, and off-campus learning.

Replicating online the vibrancy of the campus experience is within reach. Already, young musicians play “together” online. Undergraduates conduct research in virtual labs. Even campus athletics have turned to esports.

Every year, college co-op programs send tens of thousands of students to work at businesses and nonprofits. Those opportunities could expand when those partnerships are made virtual. At my university, Northeastern, we enable students pursuing their education online to take on discrete, employer-determined assignments that can be completed virtually.

Some students and their parents will justifiably want a full residential experience for at least part of the time. And a university of the future might offer three options: entirely residential, entirely online, or a hybrid of the two. All three options would keep students engaged with people and cultures around the world, making a global education more attainable and affordable for all.

Universities will remain vibrant, dynamic, diverse places. But bricks and mortar don’t propel these exchanges. The institutions that thrive postpandemic will be those that understand how humans cross the boundaries between the physical and digital — and back again.

Joseph E. Aoun is president of Northeastern University.

Town-Gown, Gone

The pandemic will hasten the decline of the college town.

By Sheila Liming

Imagine an America without college towns. Imagine Pennsylvania, for instance, without the aptly named State College, home to Penn State University. Imagine a society in which this kind of designation — a physical place named after an institution that has shaped its culture and fed its inhabitants — feels anachronistic at best, or bombastic at worst. While the coronavirus is not guaranteed to bring about the death

of the American college town, it will certainly alter and curtail the social landscape in which these towns have historically participated.

I went to college in a college town; today, I live and work in another. These towns are microcosmic symbols of American civic life, places where the whole gamut of democratic interaction feels present and accessible. As experts have already warned, though, a post-Covid vision of American higher education will very likely include revived interest in online learning. As students, faculty, and staff go online in increasing numbers, they will be shifting their attentions — and their loyalties — away from the physical spaces of the university and the towns that contain and support them. Students will have more opportunity to pursue all or part of their educations online, cobbling together an experience that blends hands-on learning, where absolutely necessary or preferable, with remote courses.

This situation, of course, has been a long time coming, but signs now suggest that it is effectively here. My university recently recommended that all new computers given to faculty and staff members be laptops, which aren't tethered to the physical space of the office. As the campus becomes dispersed through mobile technologies, the college town will suffer an identity crisis. I've seen a small version of this play out here in Grand Forks, N.D., where, in just a few years, the town's "college" identity has been diluted by shrinking institutional budgets.

Of course, we can't discount the modern university's function as landlord. I'm not saying that campuses, as physical spaces, will be abandoned, or that those lavish facilities that were built to attract students will go unused. But students' and staff's interactions with their surrounding physical environs will grow more detached and casual as they come to see a campus not as the site of learning but, merely, as one of many possible sites. All that dispersal will make the university's claim to being the fount of the lifeblood that sustains these so-called "college towns" appear ever more quaint.

Sheila Liming is an assistant professor of English at the University of North Dakota.

The Fantasy of Resistance

The managers won't save us. No one will save us.

By Marc Bousquet

Oh, to be an administrator in these good times! A virus that forces students into online learning? What an opportunity — to empty the dorms without giving refunds! — to showcase the talents of adjunct faculty members compared with their digitally hapless tenured colleagues! — to "restructure" faster than a speeding sneeze droplet! Of course, these are not the terms by which most administrators rationalize their current situations. Most of them are genuinely concerned about the interests of their students. Most of them see the changes as temporary, not precedents for permanent restructuring. But most administrators follow orders and don't issue them, at least

not on the strategic scale when they involve vast restructuring of labor and pedagogy. (Even now, I just spread a few droplets laughing at the bathetic futility of faculty members' routinely absurd fantasies that this or that messianic administrator "will fix things.")

The futility of this fantasy runs right up to the college president, who, let's face it, is no management wunderkind. The prez is there to do the bidding of the board; that's where we find the business types. They know the score: innovation = cheaper labor (+ the technology to support further cheapening). And what happens if the amiable fundraiser-in-chief should muster the will to leave her otherwise ceremonial posture and buck the dictation from the board? She gets a pink slip. No messiahs for us.

Make no mistake: The virus and market crises are opportunities for the expansion of trustee dominance. Both opportunities will be immeasurably enhanced by irresistible appeals to "sustainability" — the god term of contemporary capitalism, and the meth pipe of managerial rhetoric.

Digital learning? Now that's sustainable! Adjunct faculty? Huge lectures? Full-payer exemptions from academic standards? Legacy admissions? Quadruple levels of customer service, with a rich, first-class dorm and meals, tiering down to a mold-infested basement dorm and greasy fries with that? Diversity quotas? Privatization? Subcontractors? So sustainable! Erosion of tenure and tenure protections? The effective end of free speech on campus? Ineffective and outright fraudulent offices of "equity and inclusion"? OMG, it's all so sustainable!

Which is to say: the needs of capital are being sustained. But you? How long can you and your students sustain yourselves on the promising new horizon gifted to our masters by the virus, the market, and our own susceptibility to management's sustainability rhetoric? Good luck with that.

Marc Bousquet is the author of How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation (New York University Press, 2008).

Together, at Last

We must reimagine what community looks like after fundamental disruption.

By G. Gabrielle Starr

There are three hallmarks to a liberal-arts education: breadth, creativity, and community. Everything we do in a residential liberal-arts college like Pomona is based on the idea that human connection is key to generating and testing knowledge, unleashing creativity, and fostering the emergence of a new generation of thinkers and problem solvers.

Now we must reimagine what community looks like after fundamental disruption. The past month brought the tough decision to come as close to evacuating our campus as we responsibly could. While around 90 students remain, many more departed. As

Pomona College looks ahead, we will be called to create community anew, for every single student, staff, or faculty member, whether scattered around the globe or right here, right now.

Yet, we restart community each year, with every new class of students that arrives on our campus. And social media was already blurring some of the distance between past, present, and future students.

The abrupt dislocation of recent weeks brings what was once a shift at the edges into the very center of our intellectual existence. I have confidence that the breadth and depth of a true liberal-arts education will equip us to adapt and innovate.

What ingenious solutions will our faculty members devise to challenge their classes? What students will come up with new ways of finding friends and taking care of one another? How will staff members inspire one another to keep focused on our commitments and find new ways to fulfill them? How will we nurture one another? Those are challenges I know we're ready to meet. We've got tough days coming. Families will have their livelihoods threatened; people will become ill; we will experience loss.

But I can tell you this: American higher education will be essential not only in the immediate challenge of stopping the coronavirus but also to larger questions of finding new ways to learn, teach, form communities, and solve the world's next wave of problems. However events move around us, we will keep moving, too.

G. Gabrielle Starr is president of Pomona College.

Winners and Losers

Mega-universities will do well. The rest may struggle.

By Kevin Carey

Covid-19 has brought much of higher education to a standstill. Dorms are empty and classrooms are closed. But the pandemic will probably accelerate economic trends already in motion.

In the coming months, many high-school students planning on a traditional college will decide, out of fear or necessity, to enroll in online programs instead. Where will they go? Probably to the "new mega-universities" that have spent the past decade building for scale. They are now, in the most discreet and tasteful ways possible, preparing to exploit an enormous business opportunity.

Meanwhile, millions of students are getting an involuntary crash course in the shortcomings of distance education. While professors are making heroic efforts, a seminar thrown onto Zoom midsemester is not "online learning," a term best reserved for carefully designed courses created with the advantages and limitations of technology in mind.

But that distinction won't be obvious. The pandemic will probably give people a new appreciation for on-campus learning, and convince technology-phobic professors that they were right all along.

This is all prelude to the unavoidable economic crisis and decline in state revenues, which, if history is precedent, will fall disproportionately on higher learning. The economic meltdown will probably leave the nation with a mix of legitimately public state systems and private, nonprofit universities that merely carry state brands.

Mass unemployment tends to drive people back to college for retraining, and to make graduate school more appealing to newly minted B.A.s. But fear of college debt has become ingrained in our culture, and most of the easy money from quickly spun-up professional master's degrees has been taken. Endowments, meanwhile, have been hammered by the stock-market crash.

Add it up, and a kind of threat matrix emerges, with some institutions especially imperiled.

Tuition-dependent, non-elite private colleges with shrinking endowments and growing discount rates were already in trouble before the crisis. If they're not included in some kind of huge government bailout, many will go under.

State universities will benefit from a combination of public trust and lower tuition that is attractive to debt-averse students. But those in red states that mostly serve undergraduates and aren't in a position to go fully online are going to get squeezed by declines in tuition revenue and state support. Public universities hardly ever go bankrupt, but they can be permanently diminished.

The pandemic will probably benefit institutions with the right combination of financial cushion and ability to get bigger online. Smaller, mostly elite institutions that specialize in personal undergraduate instruction will benefit from the sudden contrast with ad hoc internet teaching. Everyone else is facing a dangerous road.

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No More 'Normal'

This crisis demands that colleges step back from self-absorption.

By Patricia McGuire

Disruption births opportunity. Amid our coronavirus grief, awareness grows that the trajectory of the crisis is uncertain, and that a "return to normal" may never come. That could be a hidden gift for higher education, an opportunity to create real change.

Pedagogically, the recent flight to online learning has reinforced the value of "live" classroom instruction for students and teachers who thrive in each other's presence. But rather than set up a false choice between online and in-person instruction, we should envision a distinctively hybrid future in which the faculty will have far more freedom to develop instructional designs using both virtual and live classes. Asynchronous delivery allows for flexible scheduling for both students and faculty members, possibly accelerating degree completion.

Rethinking instruction requires reimagining faculty work and rewards, but let's not leave other workers out of the equation. Staff personnel in admissions, advising,

finance, and more are running universities from their kitchen tables. Sadly, other staff members have lost their jobs, particularly hourly workers employed by contractors in food service or facilities.

This crisis should finally force higher education to confront its deep social inequity. As the pandemic spread, elite colleges closed quickly, sending their mostly wealthy students home to secure environments with plenty of food and computer access. Other institutions serving large numbers of low-income students faced difficult choices about how to keep some lights on, so that students could still get essential services.

This crisis demands that colleges step back from self-absorption and focus on how we can better serve our neighborhoods and the larger community. Let's reclaim our moral purpose as sources of knowledge, service, and even hope. By serving the needs of those in crisis, we will better secure our own futures.

Patricia McGuire is president of Trinity Washington University.

Bad Sports

Colleges will covet the reliable revenue — and athletes' rights will be trampled.

By Nathan Kalman-Lamb

As the world falls apart, it's tempting to ask: "Why still care about sports?" But sports have been and will again be central to our political economy — assuming it survives — and to this country's university-industrial complex. That means it requires accounting in absentia.

My confidence in the return of big-time college sports is not grounded in a hopeful vision of what is to come, but rather in grave concerns about the tenuous future awaiting higher education. Where high-revenue men's football and basketball flourish, the pomp and circumstance of college sports help to justify and validate the exorbitantly priced, commodified education sold to students. It is both the instrument of inculcation for a future donor class and part of the fabric of the college experience. As inevitable austerity regimes hoard diminished endowments, and funding of all sorts precipitously declines and budgets correspondingly shrink, college sports will become more valuable than ever as an enticement to lure steep tuition from students. (Low- or non-revenue sports across the NCAA are a different story, and some unhappy endings are already being written for them.)

What's worse, the desiccated budgets that will result from our current crisis will very likely be wielded as a cudgel against emergent athletes' rights movement. The outraged response we have seen to the public health-imperative of canceling college tournaments in the face of the pandemic is a powerful reminder of the outsize value of high-performance spectator sports. The coming financial crunch will make these lucrative spectacles all the more prized, shoving concerns over, for instance, head injuries in

football to the sidelines in favor of the increasingly precious prospect of a sustainable revenue stream.

If there is to be an alternative to this bleak future, it will require forms of solidarity that felt unimaginable just months ago — collective action among vestigial tenured faculty members; a unionized academic precariat; and staff, students, and campus athletics workers struggling (and striking) together to demand the best for each.

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Place Matters

HBCUs are rooted in a space that is edifying, nurturing, and empowering.

By Pearl K. Dowe

The relationship between Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the rest of our higher-education system is not unlike that between medical professionals and patients with pre-existing conditions. HBCUs fulfill a mission to serve in spite of difficult circumstances, low enrollments, and limited resources. These challenges have been stubborn to solve, and in the post-Covid-19 environment, many pundits will propose the quick fix of expanding online enrollment and, in some cases, completely transitioning brick-and-mortar colleges to virtual classrooms. But such “solutions” carry greater consequences for HBCUs than for predominantly white institutions. The strength of HBCUs doesn’t come just from what students learn but from where they learn.

The physical space of HBCUs symbolizes a place in which the act of education, culture, and community thrives among Black people. The relevance of this space is most visible when all are gathered during commencement; this is why I was heartbroken to learn that Howard University, where I received my Ph.D., had canceled this year’s ceremony. The beauty of Howard’s commencement goes beyond pageantry. It is a collective space that embodies the love of family, the sacrifice of a community, and the promise of education. This space is where the mission of the HBCU is fulfilled. It is — and will be — a tremendous thing to lose.

In the wake of this crisis, HBCUs must resist this pressure to minimize the presence of students on campus. The survivability of these institutions has always been rooted in their commitment to serve, educate and advance Black students in a space that is edifying, nurturing and empowering. This mission can be fulfilled only on protected grounds that are safe from the societal structures that made HBCUs necessary in the first place.

Pearl K. Dowe is a professor of political science and African American studies at Oxford College, Emory University.

We Are All Ungraders Now

Grades are stupid. We should take this opportunity to get rid of them for good.

By Phil Christman

These are strange times. At the University of Michigan, where I work — a place where upper administrators talk solemnly of reducing grade inflation, where a culture of fear is so ingrained at every level that one hears of students refusing to study together or share notes on the mere suspicion that they might slightly improve a competitor's fitness — the watchword is, suddenly, lenience. For days, emails arrived from various deans telling us to consider students' situations as we grade them, and late last week, all courses moved to pass-fail. We are all ungraders now.

This development is welcome and overdue. Because, frankly, grades are stupid, and we should take this opportunity to get rid of them for good.

Taken together, the arguments against grading are overwhelming. We learn best when we're intrinsically motivated and deeply involved in a task; grades are distracting extrinsic factors that actually reduce student motivation. They are famously unreliable and, in their vagueness and subjectivity, they let implicit biases — racism, classism, sexism — run rampant. They do not improve performance as well as descriptive feedback does.

It's not even a question of "tradition": Historically, our grading system is newish. Grades persist, I suspect, because they allow institutions to sell prestige by rationing the appearance of excellence, and also because of a persistent upper-class folk belief that a single, measurable, standard-distributed trait called "intelligence" exists in every person. (By this metric, then, are teachers who curve grades attesting to a belief in their own irrelevance?)

There's been a slew of brilliant recent work from intellectuals of various tendencies — Cathy Davidson, Alfie Kohn, Asao Inoue, Peter Elbow, Jessie Stommel — on how teachers across a range of disciplines can "ungrade." (Yes, STEM disciplines, too.) And ungrading is a spectrum: It can include practices like making rubrics together with students; increasing students' self-evaluation and reflection; and simply being open about the problems with grading, even as you continue to do it, because, like many of us, your institution requires letter grades and, like many of us, you don't have tenure.

Do what you can. But we shouldn't wait for the next pandemic to put frail, brilliant human minds back at the center of our teaching practices.

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Build Something Better

Time to reconsider who the leaders and innovators in higher ed really are.

By Erin Bartram

I have no idea what will be left after this is over, or whether it will ever be “over.” Given that uncertainty, people in higher ed should take this moment to acknowledge what they may have worked hard to ignore. Yes, the pandemic has laid bare and intensified the failings of our economy and society, including higher education, but these failings have always been visible, and many people have long worked to make the rest of us see.

The reality is that most people think of colleges primarily as places where teaching happens. Does everyone working in higher ed value teaching as much as the public does? How might things be changed if we did?

This crisis has also revealed how good teaching is important, and how difficult it is. It takes work, expertise, flexibility, and support, and it’s as much about building meaningful relationships as it is about delivering disciplinary content and skills. Does our graduate training reflect this? Our methods of evaluation? Our promotion-and-tenure guidelines? Our funding and recognition of the people who work in our IT departments, libraries, and teaching-and-learning centers? Good online teaching takes particular expertise, and we should not confuse what many of us are doing now with true online teaching. How might we better value that expertise?

Perhaps the hardest truth for some to acknowledge is that good and valuable teaching and research happen at all levels, in all kinds of institutions. This should be a moment to reconsider who the leaders and innovators in higher ed really are. It should be a moment when many admit what they’ve always known: that the people they pay to teach and research are employees. For many faculty members who believed they were secure in their positions, it’s a good time to look around, come to grips with who your colleagues are, and hope they’ll extend you the grace and support you didn’t always extend to them. For many people, and many institutions, these reckonings may come too late.

This crisis has made these things harder to ignore, but not impossible. Just as in our society at large, some people and institutions have the power and capital to ignore the pandemic, confident that they are insulated enough to weather the storm. But at this moment, they are few, and even they may not be able to insulate themselves completely.

I don’t know what will happen to higher ed, but for the vast majority of people involved in it, acknowledging what Covid-19 has revealed, recognizing the activists who have been organizing to change its inequities for years, and working together in solidarity might be the only ways to build something better. If we get the chance.

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Things Fall Apart

Education — even online — requires ceaseless labor to keep going.

By Lee Vinzel

Clayton Christensen, the prophet of “disruptive innovation,” died in January. In the 2008 book, *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, Christensen and his co-authors argued that the computerization of education would enable “customized learning” and “student-centric classrooms.” Even after the MOOC bubble burst in the mid-2010s, Christensen stuck to his guns. In 2017 he predicted that online education would cause up to half of American universities to go bankrupt within a decade.

One imagines that, if Christensen were still alive, he would say that the time of online education had finally come. He wouldn’t be alone. As universities have moved online, the Twittersphere has lit up with forecasts — many from anxious faculty members — that administrators would use this crisis to push a “neoliberal” agenda of virtualization. The American university might never be the same again.

Debates about the virtues and faults of online college courses will continue for a long time. (I am on the team that thinks online classes lose something fundamental.) But the coronavirus crisis should draw our attention to something else — the essential work of university staff members in keeping our operations going. From one perspective, universities are large-scale technological and social systems that require constant maintenance, upkeep, and care. Regardless of whether we choose to move many more classes online from now on, college education requires the ceaseless labors of people we can call “maintainers.”

The neglect of maintainers in our conversations about technology is a near-constant characteristic of the ideology of innovation, which pours attention on the new and draws our gaze away from the work that sustains what we’ve already created. Christensen’s *Disrupting Class*, for instance, does not contain the word “maintenance.” Somehow this stuff was all supposed to fix itself, or never break down.

When universities began telling students and the faculty not to return to campus, staff members were initially left out. One of my oldest friends works in IT at a major state university in the Midwest. His university directed students and faculty members to stay away, while the director of IT was asking his staff members to come to work in person because doing so was more efficient. My friend’s workplace was not alone — staff members at universities around the nation complained about such in-person work requirements and worried about how the increased load would bear on already strained digital systems.

Mercifully, this situation changed quickly. My friend is now working from home, and many universities, including my own, have put out good and generous policies aimed at staff. (There are negative exceptions, of course.) Whatever roads forward higher-education leaders choose, including more online courses, we need to do a better job

recognizing, compensating, and planning for the work of maintainers, without whom our colleges would fall to pieces.

Lee Vinsel is an assistant professor of science, technology, and society at Virginia Tech.

A Test of Infrastructure

If you build it, they will come. If not, not.

By Amy Hungerford

Crisis tests infrastructure. Nothing is more apparent in the present crisis. But the story of infrastructure — its triumphs, failures, and fragility — lacks charisma. Heroic individuals inspire generosity and commitment. Institutions, and the infrastructure they embody, are heroes not fitted to the news cycle. They are short on human appeal.

And yet the institutions we represent, those dedicated to higher education, underpin great human acts. University hospitals labor alongside community and charitable health-care institutions. Universities' dual mission of research and clinical care promises both immediate intervention and, eventually, a cure. And thousands of colleges, public and private, some centuries old, became internet sensations within days. The faculty members delivering that education have proved the most flexible of professionals. I have seen colleagues who earned Ph.D.s 30 or 40 years ago turn on a dime to reconceive courses for a new medium so that students can continue to learn.

The infrastructure of liberal education — the core departments often grouped as “arts and sciences” — cultivates the intellectual dexterity required to weather a crisis like the present one. Writing, analysis, computation, languages, knowledge of other times and places: These are seeded in arts-and-sciences classrooms and are required across professions. The result is adaptive leadership in medicine, science, business, government, the media, nonprofit work.

Access to those classrooms requires its own infrastructure. Today's crisis reminds us why we must be tenacious in building a better version. Indeed, radical support for the infrastructure of access is required if higher education is to serve society well.

Michael Bloomberg — as a philanthropist if not as a politician — has the kind of vision for infrastructure that I'm calling for. Bloomberg gives to many particular causes, but his largest single gift, a \$1.8-billion financial-aid endowment for the Johns Hopkins University, supports educational infrastructure in its purest form: It provides access to an institution as such, rather than support for one subject, problem, idea, or personal project.

Governments, not just visionary donors, will be essential as well. Public institutions need durable legislation that establishes higher education for all as a priority. Ever more vividly, day by day, we are coming to realize that access to education at all levels requires universal basic broadband, run as a public utility. Infrastructure of this kind

will ensure that education continues under conditions of social disruption, and, in good times, will provide the engine for economic and social uplift.

Today's crisis teaches us that universities and their supporters must refocus on shoring up, once and for all, the basic infrastructure of higher education: research, teaching, and student access (both financial and technological). This radical recommitment would help to resolve not only this crisis but others, too — climate change, environmental degradation, income inequality, water access, food supply, the next virus, and further challenges we have yet to imagine.

Amy Hungerford is executive vice president for the arts and sciences, dean of the faculty of arts and sciences, and a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University.

Freezing to Death

Pauses in hiring represent the end of higher education as we know it.

By Leif Weatherby

In the economic fallout of the global coronavirus pandemic, colleges have announced widespread hiring freezes. Euphemisms like “pause” or “slowdown” have emerged, and surely others are close behind. But regardless of what it's called, the de facto university hiring freeze is fundamentally dishonest. What's really being announced is the devaluation of academic work, the worsening of an already skewed relationship between demand and labor. As last week's initial unemployment claims rose tenfold above their highest weekly level in the Great Recession, universities should resist the general devaluation of labor in the U.S.

As of 2018, about 60 percent of all college instructors were adjuncts, including graduate workers. We can be certain that no hiring freeze will apply to them. Not renewing the short-term contracts of the adjunct reserve army would incapacitate the university faster than any pandemic. So when you hear any version of the term “hiring freeze,” think “adjunctification on an unprecedented scale.”

It is not surprising that universities have once again chosen the debunked “strategy” of austerity. But given the magnitude of the crisis, this course of action seems suicidal, sending a signal that we should not expect the university's already diminished form to survive the coronavirus.

The question that lurks behind the lie of a “hiring freeze” is the very shape and vocation of the 21st-century university. Beyond threatening the research and teaching agendas that universities claim to prize, adjunctification reveals that the university is on board with the already eroded sense of labor value in America today. The opaque term “adjunct” papers over the reality that the university is participating in the gig economy, abandoning the notion of a “job” for these workers in the process. To halt only the kind of hiring that comes with “benefits” (read: basic rights and dignity) is to

point the way toward a university that is somehow worse than the neoliberal one we have already been forced to accept.

This is not to diminish the very real crisis that universities will face in a postpandemic world. Yet it is enormously demoralizing to witness the very richest of these universities, including Ivies with endowments that exceed the GDPs of small nations, greeting this unprecedented global crisis with anticipatory austerity measures. Harvard's non-tenure-track faculty members have called for extensions of their contracts, but this action would be the bare minimum. Perhaps it is time for the fund-raising wings of these universities to train their sights on Capitol Hill, joining the push for bailouts for those most harmed by a shutdown of the real economy. The university must decide if it is to be an employer or a gig-economy platform. Educating a critical citizenry depends on finding ways to devote resources to the university's most precarious workers.

If university leadership cannot find ways to invest in labor — to use the crisis to reverse, rather than exacerbate, the general tendency — then the critical, public, and pedagogical missions of the modern university will disappear altogether. The brink of apocalypse is the moment for us to choose a better path.

Leif Weatherby is an associate professor of German at New York University.

The End of Esotericism

Take down the walls around our research.

By Agnes Callard

Two kinds of walls guard the academy. The first kind is physical exclusivity: the walls around the classroom, the quadrangle, the dormitory. These walls mean that some people — prospective students — are excluded from entry by cost, by admissions standards, by age, by family commitments. The second kind of wall is intellectual esotericism: the wall around academic writing and communication, rendering them inaccessible to all but a few specialists. The first wall circumscribes a given undergraduate institution as the exclusive privilege of a chosen few; the second walls the public out of professional academic research. Both of these walls are expensive to maintain.

The cost-saving possibilities of lowering the first wall are the familiar benefits of online education: eliminating expensive on-campus living, fewer professors serving more students, the efficiency of reusable, recorded lectures. We could make college a lot cheaper, make barriers to entry lower, and admit many more people to a given college, if we didn't have to all be physically present in the same small room. This is obvious to everyone.

The cost of the other kind of wall, however, is less obvious. People do not appreciate just how expensive academic esotericism is — and I'm not thinking primarily of the fact that academics travel to conferences to speak to their peers, though there is that. I'm thinking of the fact that academics use their highly trained intellects and highly

valued research time to produce intellectual content directed at only a tiny group of specialists.

The poorer, postcoronavirus academic universe may not be able to afford to keep both sets of walls as high as they have traditionally been; we may face trade-offs, and it is likely that different fields will have different ways of thinking about these trade-offs. For example, teachers in STEM fields may be ready to move their courses online, and the esotericism of STEM research may be both essential to it and be underwritten by its practical applications. In the humanities, the situation is reversed.

Complex novels, new languages, historical study, and philosophical argumentation can be difficult and frustrating when first encountered. The classroom cultivates pleasure and joy in these pursuits by sheltering students from the immediate demands of the outside world, and by surrounding them, as they take their first steps, with the help of a small, small, supportive intellectual community. The walls around our classrooms are essential, and that means we ought to be prepared to make sacrifices when it comes to the walls around our research.

The internet makes it easier than ever to lower those walls: It is now relatively easy for an academic to communicate extramurally, so long as she is prepared to move somewhat outside her comfort zones of specialized terminology; technical apparatuses; hypercomplex academic syntax; and narrow, disciplinary-specific lines of thought. Instead of using the internet to teach our undergraduates — a job for which it is not suited — let us use it to reach out to them after they have graduated. If we succeed at this, we would be viewed by more people as making an essential contribution to their lives, rather than as a (newly unaffordable) social luxury.

Unlike a century ago, it is now true that a decent proportion of people outside of universities spent at least four years in them. So the interest is out there. At least, it had better be, if we did our jobs in the first place.

I believe that the postcoronavirus world may be a world in which we would choose between exclusivity in undergraduate teaching and exclusivity in academic research. We should take great care to make the right choice.

Agnes Callard is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago.

Make the Most of a Natural Experiment

Data from the crisis will help us face looming demographic challenges.

By Nathan D. Grawe

For social scientists, it is difficult not to see in the current situation a giant “natural experiment.” We’re adopting new teaching technologies, engaging with advisees in new ways, and streamlining decision-making to match the speed of the crisis. Some of these changes have the potential to improve student outcomes. When the pandemic abates and campuses return to normal, we should permanently employ the best of those changes.

Researchers will examine these questions from a national perspective. But unlike the laws of physics, which apply equally to us all, heterogeneous effects are common in the social sciences. A practice that produces positive effects at one institution or with one student subgroup may generate negative effects in a different context. As a result, the most powerful lessons will probably be local.

While much data is collected as a matter of course — course registrations, student demographic data, grades — thoughtful planning now can generate richer data on new teaching techniques or governance practices.

The value of such information may be particularly great as we live through demographic changes that were here before the virus and will persist in its wake — declining fertility coupled with demographic shifts within the population. William H. Frey, of the Brookings Institution, estimates that while the country will become “minority white” in 2045, those under age 18 will hit that milestone this year. Might coronavirus-motivated experiments bolster student success in a changing student population?

Higher education has been lampooned as incapable of keeping pace with society’s needs. The radical reimagination of teaching, learning, and governance that has taken place over the past month challenges that criticism. And with forethought to evaluation, our responses to the crisis can prepare us for the dynamic changes necessary to fulfill our missions in a changing world.

Nathan D. Grawe, a professor of economics at Carleton College, is the author of Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

Beyond Survival Strategies

Our pedagogy is a form of mutual aid.

By Malav Kanuga and Jaskiran Dhillon

As the global pandemic deepens, adaptation is the name of the game.

Judging by the countless emails we’ve received over the past few weeks, the model adaptation to a pandemic university looks something like this: Skill up overnight; simulate face-to-face classroom interaction through a Zoom screen; be flexible and responsive to needs as they come up, while still putting “productivity” and “efficiency” first; divert all our efforts to seamlessly making the shift to the new feel as much like the old as possible.

In short, we’ve been asked to do the impossible: to maintain the university’s status quo as the world breaks apart.

We are told to follow the now-familiar script of adapting to crises and new realities while confining our adaptation strategies to the prerogatives of neoliberalism. Our job, that is, is to tend to the university’s economic health over the wellbeing (economic, psychological, and physical) and flourishing of our students, our communities, and ourselves. Why? What other futures might be present in this moment of exception?

What opportunities for dismantling higher ed's colonial legacy and building something better might these urgent calls for adaptation be foreclosing?

But another story is also emerging, a story of people rejecting their prescribed social and professional roles and demanding a fundamental reordering of our social world. This is already happening beyond the hallowed grounds of academe: rent strikes, walkouts by Amazon and gig workers, growing demands for debt forgiveness, the release of prisoners, and an end to migrant detention.

We have an opportunity to do the same in higher ed. We could open up our political imaginations beyond what's prescribed by the self-interest of our universities and state institutions. In an era of social distancing, for instance, some of us are questioning the longstanding barriers to cultivating holistic connections with our students and colleagues. We are not just unattached teachers anymore — and, in fact, we never were.

We must care for our students in ways that recognize that they are more than students, and that their capacities to be students are interconnected to insecurities — of housing, food, and access to health services — and vulnerabilities — racialized, gendered, class-based — the structures of which we must study critically and aim to dismantle as we adapt to our new world.

We are in a position to think of our pedagogy as a form of mutual aid. We can learn together to push past our fear and isolation and inspire deep reflections on the power and fragility of our human and ecological interdependence. We can think through concrete strategies for surviving — and for living better.

Malav Kanuga is a visiting assistant professor of anthropology at Stockton University and founding editor and publisher of Common Notions Books. Jaskiran Dhillon is an associate professor of global studies and anthropology at the New School.

The Purpose of Our Profession Is at Risk

Class inequities make it difficult to justify our work to the public.

By Hua Hsu

I started my current job in 2007, not long before the Great Recession began ravaging retirement accounts. My more senior colleagues mused that they would now simply have to delay retirement, and it was hard to blame them. At the time, I felt fortunate to have made it in before their choices shut the door on new hires.

Class inequity afflicts academe in particular ways, whether it's full professors versus adjuncts or wealthy private universities versus struggling state colleges beholden to budget-slashing legislators. Persistence and striving won't get you from one pole to the other; disparity is near-permanent.

At its best, the academy feels like a refuge from the exigencies of the rest of the world. It's why many of us came here in the first place, to pursue knowledge or meaning at a safe distance from market forces, political fashion, the logic of short-term deliverables.

And yet from the adjunct crisis to ballooning student debt, our profession increasingly relies on the same exploitative economic forces that power the rest of the world. Our spaces of critical inquiry are now built on a system in which a minority has absolute job security, and most are permanently waylaid, living paycheck to paycheck.

The coronavirus crisis challenges the purpose of our work. Some of us essentially have jobs for life, teaching young people destined to slug it out in the gig economy. How are we to justify that? Do we critique austerity or adapt to it, doing what we can for the public good?

If we survive this pandemic, we must wean ourselves off the hierarchies and inequalities of our profession. They hinder our ability to engage with the broader public, whose support and patronage we need to survive. Teaching should be a priority. So should reassessing administrative bloat, the richly profitable and exploitative academic-publishing cartels, and the necessity of travel. If “academic freedom” is a mandate to delve into difficult terrains, we must apply the same critical lens to our own livelihoods — the privileges some of us have and all of us covet. Extreme job security for the few is no longer an ethical model in a time of mass precarity. This vaunted principle of freedom — the current version of it, at least — is not worth a system premised on elitism and inequality.

Hua Hsu is an associate professor of English at Vassar College and a staff writer at The New Yorker.

Hope Among the Ruins

After the virus, might new sprouts of humanistic education arise?

By Patrick Deneen

The landscape of higher education that arose after World War II is coming to an end. The liberal-arts college tradition will be a luxury good that even the wealthy will hesitate to purchase. Graduate education in the humanities and social sciences (except, perhaps, economics) will shrink as faculty positions are frozen and then eliminated. Trends that have favored “practical” education will accelerate, though fewer students will be willing or able to take on debt that will never be realistically reimbursable. Market “efficiencies” in the form of online teaching and reliance upon transitory, non-tenure-track instructors will take up the slack.

The political fallout of these accelerating arrangements is unpredictable, but expect further divisions between the haves and the have-nots. In the earliest days of the virus’s rampage, Harvard indicated that it would not pay contract workers, and Yale refused to offer its dormitories to health workers who needed to be isolated from their families. Though both changed course after public outcry, their basic instincts were born from the genuine privilege that they have effusively claimed to oppose for at least the past decade.

The prominent show of concerns over diversity and inclusion will ring hollow to a growing number of un- and underemployed workers from every race and class, while the most privileged will continue to manipulate the system to gain admission for their children.

While the haves will survive, their political position is likely to become even more perilous. As people struggle to survive in an economy increasingly reliant on automation and gig workers, the endowments of rich colleges will become more attractive for populist pillage.

One longer-term possibility is a renaissance of liberal-arts education at the local level. Relying less on buildings, endowments, tenured professors, administrators, and accreditation agencies, humanist teachers may connect with families who crave an education in the classics for their children. Perhaps alongside training in trades, crafts, or professions, such education will resemble the liberal-arts education of the 19th century, based especially in more traditional and religious communities — those same communities from which the original liberal-arts institutions arose.

Amid the wreckage of this plague upon an already deeply diseased polity — in a society very likely crueler, more technocratic, more divided by wealth and poverty, privilege and plight — might we yet see sprouts of a genuine humanistic and liberal education? From those sprouts a different ruling class might yet emerge.

Patrick Deneen is a professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame.

Real College for Real Students

Higher education will never work if students' basic needs go unmet.

By Sara Goldrick-Rab

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed to many institutions the sizable gaps in their support services for students' basic needs. Those gaps will only continue to grow in the coming months as unemployment rates rise and students begin to question whether they will ever be able to return to their studies.

It is critical for higher education to adopt a set of robust antipoverty tools and to push for policy changes to support that work. Cash transfers, which give money directly to students, are among the most effective approaches, and institutions will have to modernize their emergency-aid programs to make those deliveries possible.

Colleges must also help students connect to unemployment insurance and SNAP, just as they help them complete the Fafsa. For the next stimulus bill, colleges' government-relations teams must fight to make those programs far more supportive of undergraduates.

Student-affairs personnel need rapid retraining to focus on case management and use a social-work driven approach to help students connect to services in their communities. Without these changes, enrollment will rapidly decline, along with rates of degree completion.

Meeting students' basic needs was always central to the work of being a student-ready college. Now it is increasingly central to higher education's very survival.

Sara Goldrick-Rab is founding director of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice and a professor of higher-education policy and sociology at Temple University.

Cleaning Empty Buildings

Workers once treated as shadows are not afraid to speak out.

By BoJohn McClung

Across its different campuses and affiliated facilities, the University of Washington, where I work on the janitorial staff, employs over 34,000 people. A modern-day city-state unto itself, UW is a not-so-shining example of how years of neoliberal rot have made our institutions — and especially the people who live, learn, and work in them — particularly vulnerable to the current crisis.

Roughly 8,000 of those employees earn over \$100,000 a year, with some earning in the millions; meanwhile, campus workers in kitchens eat leftovers before they're thrown out because they can't afford groceries, let alone medical bills. Underfunded departments have been liquidated, and a university warehouse, where we once stored months' worth of supplies that are now desperately needed, was closed up.

Brochures tout UW's commitment to capital 'D' Diversity, while Filipina and Ethiopian housekeeping staff on minimum wage, along with so many other essential people who keep the university running — people like me and my co-workers — have never been treated as anything more than shadows in the background.

And now, at this esteemed institution, only shadows remain. Everyone is scared. My managers are hiding in their offices. Their managers are hiding in their homes. Still, I worked the law-school building and the Burke Museum alone today. The buildings — massive glass-and-concrete castles several stories high — are almost entirely empty, but I spend most of my day cleaning them alone, wondering why the university doesn't just lock the damn doors and pay us to quarantine.

Many who work with me feel the same, and we're taking a stand. While labor leadership around the state put the screws on Governor Inslee to issue a shelter-in-place order, we organized a phone blitz on Ana Mari Cauce, UW's president, to demand hazard pay, stronger personal protective gear, and/or quarantine leave with pay. This is just the beginning. I've been asthmatic since I was 8 years old, and I'm terrified of a bronchial death fever, but I'll tell you one thing: I'm sure as hell not afraid of the bosses anymore.

BoJohn McClung is an anthropologist, custodian, and labor-and-community organizer based in Seattle.

Publishing in a Pandemic

No time for formalities.

By Matt McAdam

This crisis might finally put to rest what I call the college-admissions model of academic publishing. In that model, a book proposal is like a college application: a document that you stress over, work within an inch of its life, then submit for evaluation. University-press editors are distant gatekeepers you interact with only via highly polished documents. You don't informally talk with editors about your work or ideas.

This picture of publishing is bad for both authors and for editors like me. It's bad for authors because it adds to the overwhelming anxiety of academic life while robbing them of productive interactions with editors early on in a project. It's bad for editors because it encourages passivity — teaching them to build a list by relying only on what comes over the transom.

The good news is that for the most part, this isn't how publishing really works. Sure, editors acquire and develop books, but they are also a part of the scholarly community. We're excited by ideas and want to hear what you're thinking, even if it isn't a polished book idea. What are you teaching? What are students excited about? What big idea in your field is waiting to be written? All of these thoughts and more are what editors want to engage you about. And by "you" I mean all of you: grad students, dissertation writers, contingent and tenure-track faculty members, senior scholars.

Editors haven't done enough to dispel the college-admissions model. But that is changing, and it's happening right now on Twitter. Amid the outbreak and the resultant cancellation of conferences and editors' campus visits, many acquisitions editors have taken to Twitter in a new, more inviting way. Here's Adina Popescu Burke at Yale University Press:

Sad to miss seeing
#twitterstorians
at
#oah20
but doing the next best thing: Zoom meetings! Want to pitch
@yalepress
a project? Want to talk about publishing or
#altac
? DM me and let's set something up!

Janet Audet, at Harvard University Press, has been holding editor office hours on Twitter:

Calling all aspiring science authors and science writers: “Editorial Office Hour” is officially open! DM me to discuss proposals and book ideas, or ask a question about our publishing process. I look forward to DMing with you! @Harvard_Press @HarvardUPLondon #EditorOfficeHours

The strongest repudiation of the college-admissions model on Twitter is from Heather Hughes, also at Harvard. After inviting potential authors to DM her with questions, she adds:

PS, i do not care about prestige or whether or not you are TT. i care about ideas, communication, & collaboration. it's true that not every great book can find a home at HUP, but that doesn't mean we can't connect. it's one ecosystem.

Publishing is about ideas, connection, and relationships — not gatekeeping. So take us up on our offers. Send us an email or a DM. Set up a Zoom or a Skype. Just like you, we've been cooped up for weeks. Please, be in touch.

Matt McAdam is a senior editor at the Johns Hopkins University Press.

After the University

When colleges shut down, intellectual life goes on.

By Chad Wellmon

The University of Virginia is closed, but my wife, three kids, and I are confined to campus. Compared with the city apartments of friends in New York and Paris, our 12-foot ceilings and windows to gardens about to burst into spring colors make for a relatively happy quarantine.

Living in an 18th-century house that once belonged to a U.S. president, in the center of a college campus, during a global pandemic is uncanny. From the Rotunda's wide steps to the Lawn's punctuated slope to the bricked garden walls, UVa's Grounds in the past decade have seen faculty protests, student graduations, and, at one horrible point, white supremacists chanting “Jews will not replace us.”

The Grounds are empty now. Students never returned from spring break, labs and libraries closed weeks ago, and faculty and staff members are at home. Reading, teaching, and thinking are happening, but not here.

But from the middle of this empty campus I can see how intellectual work has now taken different forms: online quarantine journals, ad hoc Zoom seminars, reading groups organized over Twitter, my 16-year-old son's late-night discussions carried on while gaming. Intellectual work has also been put to different purposes. Just two weeks ago, my reading and writing were shaped by a schedule that jealously guarded my time from intrusions, including, all too often, joy and reflection.

Now, as my kids, wife, and I do whatever it is we're doing from home, I can't protect an hour or even a minute. I can't see the boundary between my professional life and my life as a husband and father. That divide helped me to think and to write, but it also encouraged me to conflate intellectual work with the university and to overlook the intellectual work required to make meaningful forms of life beyond the university.

Much of the business of the university continues. Yet from my desk on Monroe Hill, there is no busyness in view. And it is here and now, on an empty college campus, that I can imagine an intellectual life after the university. I can imagine people gathering to read, to talk, and to think together, not because they need a credential for a middle-class life, but because they desire the goods such activities promise. People not satisfied by what college now means for most Americans: a credential, a job, status, and the attendant moral anxiety induced by their pursuit.

In such a vision, universities could well continue to exist, although perhaps changed and fewer in number. Universities have survived plagues, wars, and social transformations by evolving from keepers of theological orthodoxy to global corporations. I hope to continue to work at one. I need the money.

I also hope that the vanity and self-regard that professional academics demonstrate by conflating the university and intellectual life will be punctured. The functions of my own university had to grind to a halt before I could see that our intellectual work is much bigger than any one institution — and much more urgent.

Chad Wellmon is an associate professor of German studies at the University of Virginia.

The Ted K Archive

Chronicle contributors

How Will the Pandemic Change Higher Education?

Professors, administrators, and staff on what the coronavirus will leave in its wake.

April 10, 2020

<www.chronicle.com/article/how-will-the-pandemic-change-higher-education>

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