

A MAJOR TEST: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Testimony provided to the
United States House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment

July 2020

Shaun R. Harper, Ph.D.

President

American Educational Research Association

Provost Professor of Education and Business
USC Race and Equity Center Executive Director
University of Southern California

COVID-19 is affecting most aspects of teaching, learning, and work at higher education institutions across the United States. College and university presidents and other institutional leaders are investing tremendous time and energy into finding ways to reopen campuses as safely and as quickly as possible. Campus taskforces are balancing public health concerns with financial considerations. Attention is also being paid to supporting faculty members in adapting to hybrid, or in many instances fully online forms of teaching. Plans are being developed to ensure physical distancing in classrooms, labs, residence halls, and campus dining facilities. Additionally, institutions with big-time intercollegiate sports programs are pursuing various ways to afford student-athletes opportunities to compete, even if doing so must occur in stadiums and arenas with no fans to cheer them on. The pandemic has left all of us in higher education with much to do and rethink. As we continue engaging in the important planning and recovery activities described thus far, it is important that we also devote serious attention to numerous racial equity threats. I present ten in this testimony.

1. **Disproportionately Placing Essential Workers at Risk** – As is the case across most industries in the U.S.,¹ the higher education workforce is racially stratified. According to a 2019 report from the American Council on Education, 73% of full-time instructional faculty members and over 80% of professionals in most leadership positions at our nation’s postsecondary institutions are White.² Data from the U.S. Department of Education show that in 2018, 46% of professionals in low-level service roles were employees of color.³ Given the positions they disproportionately occupy, White employees will have more flexibility to work remotely and teach online. Custodians, food service workers, groundskeepers, and maintenance staff, on the other hand, are

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>

² Espinosa, Lorelle L., Jonathan M. Turk, Morgan Taylor, and Hollie M. Chessman. 2019. Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

³ National Center for Education Statistics: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_314.40.asp

far likelier to be deemed “essential workers” when campuses reopen. Being required to come to campus more frequently and interact with other workers and students therefore places employees of color and the family members with whom they live at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19. Campus reopening plans must consider the racial stratification of the workforce, specifically the health implications for employees of color and lower-income essential workers. Federal aid specifically earmarked for the safety of essential workers would help postsecondary institutions provide personal protective equipment, cleaning supplies, contact tracing, and testing, all of which would reduce the risk of disproportionately exposing employees of color to the Coronavirus.

2. **Racialization of Layoffs and Terminations** – Because higher education workplaces are so stratified by race, employees of color are more vulnerable to financial cutbacks. Tenure-track faculty members, as well as professional staff in mid- and senior-level roles, are less likely than are administrative assistants, workers in the aforementioned service roles, and part-time instructors to be laid off or terminated. On the one hand, roles in which employees of color are disproportionately represented are considered essential to campus operations. But on the other, they are positions with the least amount of protection; their work can be performed by lower-cost temporary workers or redistributed to a smaller number of colleagues in their units (which would also result in workload inequities). COVID-19 has exacerbated racial disparities in joblessness throughout the American economy, with rates for Black workers being highest.⁴ Financial effects of the pandemic will be felt for many years, which will force higher education leaders to make tough workforce reduction decisions. Inattention to the race of the persons being terminated and laid off will inevitably yield pronounced negative effects on employees of color given the positions they occupy. Hence, campus reopening plans must specify ways to avoid even more significant employment inequities by race. Federal and state investments would help minimize the necessity of workforce reductions at higher education institutions.

3. **Risk of Violence for Asian American and Asian International Students and Employees** – Recent studies document stigmatization, stereotyping, and discrimination, as well as acts of physical violence toward Asian Americans and Asian immigrants in the U.S. throughout the pandemic.⁵ Characterizing COVID-19 as “Kung Flu” and the “Chinese Virus” likely accelerated bias and hate crimes against these groups. During the 2018-19 academic school year, there were 1,606,688 Asian American students, faculty, and staff at postsecondary institutions across the country.⁶ Also, many international students and workers on Visas are from Asian countries. Associating them with the Coronavirus will undoubtedly continue as people return to campuses. Attitudinal stereotypes may lead to harmful behaviors ranging from

⁴ Gould, Elise, and Valerie Wilson. 2020. Black Workers Face Two of the Most Lethal Preexisting Conditions for Coronavirus—Racism and Economic Inequality. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

⁵ Chen, H. Alexander, Jessica Trinh, and George P. Yang. 2020. Anti-Asian Sentiment in the United States – COVID-19 and History. American Journal of Surgery.

⁶ National Center for Education Statistics: *ibid*, and https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_306.10.asp

constant racial microaggressions to physical violence against anyone who appears to be Asian. Yale University sociologists Hannah Tessler, Meera Choi, and Grace Kao suggest these threats pose considerable mental health and anxiety challenges for this population.⁷ Thus, campus reopening plans must include ways to protect Asian and Asian American people.

4. **Sinophobic and Xenophobic Travel Bans and Visa Complications** – Even though rates of infection and death are presently higher in America than anywhere else in the world,⁸ COVID-19's association with people from Asian countries broadly and China specifically could lead to implicit (or perhaps even explicit) biases in the review of Visa applications for students wishing to study at U.S. colleges and universities. If there is a second wave of the Coronavirus, there may be travel bans prohibiting students from China and other countries from entering ours. Federal regulations and oversight are needed to ensure this does not occur in sinophobic or otherwise discriminatory ways.
5. **Trauma and Grief Support for Persons Disproportionately Experiencing Loss** – COVID-19 infections and deaths are disproportionately affecting African Americans and other communities of color.⁹ Because of this, students and workers from these groups are likelier than are their White classmates and colleagues to have lost a family member, friend, or someone in their community. This then means that students of color and employees of color are much more susceptible to prolonged sadness and depression. They will be required to balance grief and perhaps trauma with academics and professional work. Reopening plans must include ways to ensure these campus community members have more than adequate mental and emotional support resources.
6. **Sending Infected Students Home to Vulnerable Families and Communities** – Most students come to college from same-race families. It is therefore reasonable to presume that many Native American undergraduates, for example, will return home to Native American families during holidays and breaks, perhaps even occasionally on weekends throughout the semester. Many postsecondary institutions plan to conclude on-campus living and learning by Thanksgiving in anticipation of a possible second wave of the virus.¹⁰ Students who become infected with COVID-19 and then return home pose a risk of infecting others in their families. Given the disproportionately higher numbers of Coronavirus infections and deaths among people of color, it is plausible that students of color returning home from college could pose an especially big risk to already vulnerable communities. Reopening plans have to consider the consequences of sending infected students of color home to communities that have already been disproportionately devastated by COVID-19.

⁷ Tessler, Hannah, Meera Choi, and Grace Kao. 2020. The Anxiety of Being Asian American: Hate Crimes and Negative Biases During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*.

⁸ Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center. 2020. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>

⁹ Poteat, Tonia, Gregorio A. Millett, LaRon E. Nelson, and Chris Beyrer. 2020. Understanding COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities among Black Communities in America: The Lethal Force of Syndemics. *Annals of Epidemiology*.

¹⁰ Hubler, Shawn. 2020, June 25. College Calendars in the Pandemic: No Fall Break and Home by Thanksgiving. *New York Times*.

7. **Placing Black Football and Men’s Basketball Players at Disproportionately Higher Risk** – Football is a contact sport. In addition to tackling each other and depositing germs on balls being passed from player to player, football student-athletes and their peers who play on other intercollegiate sports teams exercise, dine, travel, and watch films together, oftentimes in extremely close proximity. Colleges and universities have begun bringing student-athletes back to campus for practices and conditioning; they are being tested regularly, in some instances daily.¹¹ Institutions, especially those with big-time sports programs, are scrambling to find creative ways to ensure crowd control and physical distancing in stadiums by the start of college football season this September.¹² There are indeed ways to bolster protections for spectators. But doing so for student-athletes is much more difficult. In 2018, Black men were 2.4% of undergraduate students enrolled at the 65 universities in the “Power Five” athletic conferences (ACC, Big 10, Big 12, Pac 12, and SEC) – yet, they comprised 55% of football teams and 56% of men’s basketball teams on those campuses.¹³ Thus, participation in these two contact sports places Black undergraduate men at disproportionate risk of COVID-19 infection.
8. **Financial Support for Chronically Underfunded Minority-Serving Institutions** – Since their founding, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have been persistently underfunded.¹⁴ Most HBCU students are Black. Tribal Colleges are among the poorest in U.S. higher education.¹⁵ Most students who attend them are Native American. Relative to other postsecondary institutions, community colleges enroll disproportionately higher numbers of Black, Latino, Native American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and multiracial undergraduates.¹⁶ Those colleges also are funded at lower rates than other public institutions of higher education in most states.¹⁷ Reconfiguring classrooms, labs, residence halls, locker rooms, and dining halls to ensure physical distancing costs money. Additionally, income lost from students who pay to live on campus, employees and visitors who pay to park and dine in campus facilities, and other revenue-generating sources is having an enormous impact on college and university budgets. Technological substitutions for in-person teaching and learning are expensive – so too are commercial training experiences that aim to help postsecondary faculty members teach better in hybrid and entirely online formats. Surely, institutions that were already financially stressed before the pandemic are even more so now given these and other ensuing fiscal challenges. Federal and state plans must include equitable investments of public dollars into campuses that enroll the

¹¹ Hobson, Will. 2020, June 19. Testing Troubles: Varying Policies Jeopardize College Football Season, Experts Say. Washington Post.

¹² Higgins, Laine. 2020, June 30. College Football’s New Headache: Deciding Who Can Attend Games. Wall Street Journal.

¹³ Harper, Shaun R. 2018. Black Male Student-Athletes and Racial Inequities in NCAA Division I Revenue-Generating College Sports: 2018 Edition. Los Angeles: University of Southern California Race and Equity Center.

¹⁴ Harper, Shaun R., Lori D. Patton, and Ontario S. Wooden. 2009. Access and Equity for African American Students in Higher Education: A Critical Race Historical Analysis of Policy Efforts. *The Journal of Higher Education*.

¹⁵ Nelson, Christine A., and Joanna R. Frye. 2016. Tribal College and University Funding: Tribal Sovereignty at the Intersection of Federal, State, and Local Funding. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

¹⁶ National Center for Education Statistics. 2020. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_306.50.asp

¹⁷ McKinney, Lyle and Linda Serra Hagedorn. 2017. Performance-Based Funding for Community Colleges: Are Colleges Disadvantaged by Serving the Most Disadvantaged Students? *The Journal of Higher Education*.

highest numbers of students of color and low-income collegians. Investing additional federal COVID-19 recovery funds specifically into HBCUs, Tribal Colleges, and community colleges also would help them serve and protect the low-income Americans they educate, most of whom are students of color.

9. **Addressing Racialized Digital Access Inequity** – Several K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions had to provide students laptops, tablets, and other technologies when instruction abruptly moved online in March 2020.¹⁸ Devices were not enough, as some lower-income students lacked access to WiFi and reliable high-speed internet.¹⁹ Given how poverty and race co-mingle in the U.S., students of color, especially those who returned home to predominantly monoracial low-income communities, have been disproportionately impacted by digital inequities throughout the pandemic.²⁰ As colleges and universities consider reopening in phases – with a fraction of courses meeting on campus and others online – plans must include strategies and investments in closing digital access gaps for the students of color who continue to access courses from their homes in lower-income communities.

10. **Upskilling Faculty Members in Teaching Students of Color Online** – Black, Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander students are severely underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics departments.²¹ Courses in these majors are likeliest to be among the first taught in-person because many require laboratory work that cannot be performed online. Therefore, academic programs that enroll the highest numbers of collegians of color probably will be delivered in remote formats. Many colleges and universities, including my own, are investing considerably into developing the skillfulness with which instructors teach online. Active learning, dynamic student engagement strategies, and technological fluency are often emphasized. Unless these faculty development activities also include some serious attention to race and racism, problems that existed in classrooms prior to the pandemic are likely to intensify online. College students of color have long deemed teaching practices culturally unresponsive; noted how curricula routinely failed to include their cultural histories, identities, and interests; and specified the racial microaggressions and other racist experiences they have had inside and outside of college classrooms.²² Most Black students are taught by White instructors, as Black student-to-Black faculty ratios are often incredibly imbalanced at predominantly white institutions.²³ Given all this, faculty development activities included in campus reopening plans cannot focus just on creative teaching tricks to keep all students engaged online – they also must pay

¹⁸ McMurtrie, Beth. 2020, April 6. Students Without Laptops, Instructors Without Internet: How Struggling Colleges Move Online During Covid-19. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

¹⁹ Flaherty, Colleen. 2020, May 8. Reserved: Internet Parking, Using Wi-Fi Ready College Parking Lots is Now a Way of Life for Students with Limited or No Internet Access. *Inside Higher Ed*.

²⁰ Galperin, Hernan, Kurt Wyatt, and Thai Le. 2020. COVID-19 and the Distance Learning Gap. Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Annenberg Research Network on International Communication.

²¹ National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. 2019. Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering: 2019. Special Report NSF 19-304. Alexandria, VA: National Science Foundation.

²² Harper, Shaun R., and Charles H.F. Davis III. 2016. Reducing Racism in College Classrooms: Eight Actions for Faculty. *Academe*.

²³ Harper, Shaun R., and Isaiah Simmons. 2019. Black Students at Public Colleges and Universities: A 50-State Report Card. Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Race and Equity Center.

particular attention to ensuring that collegians of color are not experiencing the same racism in virtual classrooms that they long experienced in on-campus learning environments prior to the pandemic.

Each of these ten racial equity considerations is important, regardless of whether campuses resume in-person operations this fall or at some point in 2021. To be sure, these are not the only equity implications, racial or otherwise, to be considered when reopening college and university campuses. Nonetheless, federal and state policymakers, as well as regents and trustees, presidents and senior administrators, and faculty members, must take them seriously. Congress and higher education stakeholders should also continually engage students, faculty, and staff members of color to pursue additional insights into Coronavirus-related threats to racial equity. Negligence in doing so will result in the emergence of new disparities and the amplification of racial inequities that COVID-19 has already produced.