Innovative Strategies for a Successful Return to Campus in a Changing COVID-19 Landscape

Population Health Sciences

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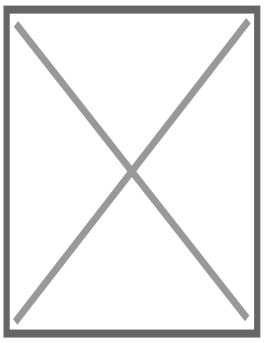
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Editor's Note: This post is part of this year's "Back to School" series in which our experts discuss the need to support the health and well-being of youth as they return to school, while also recognizing the unique challenges presented by COVID-19. Amid this landscape, PolicyLab also recently released Guidance for In-person Education in K-12 Educational Settings, offering recommendations for how schools and families might navigate the upcoming school year. For more, follow our hashtag #PolicyLabGoesBacktoSchool on Twitter.

When college students, like me, were first sent home at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we naively believed it would just be

an extended spring break, more time to spend recharging. We did not yet realize the gravity of the pandemic or how many people would suffer and lose loved ones.



Nearly a year and a half later, many college students are still taking classes from their childhood bedrooms because colleges and universities have struggled to safely reopen for in-person learning. As part of my internship at PolicyLab, I reviewed reopening plans for colleges and universities that offered in-person instruction last year, with an interest in exploring whether any lessons could be learned from them. I found that some institutions that faced the greatest obstacles—large student bodies, limited research infrastructure and restricted funds—limited transmission by implementing innovative strategies.

More than 800 colleges and universities have announced vaccine mandates for the fall, with the number expected to rise after the recent FDA approval for the Pfizer vaccine. However, most colleges allow medical and religious exemptions, and many institutions will still not require vaccination at all. COVID-19 cases have previously been linked to college reopening, and counties with large institutions saw increased transmission last fall. That said, most colleges can't force every student to be vaccinated, so non-pharmaceutical interventions continue to be vital to a safe reopening this fall.

Large colleges, those with limited research infrastructure and those with limited funds face special challenges as students return to in-person instruction. The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) has earmarked nearly $40 billion for colleges to provide emergency financial aid to students and implement public health measures, and with this new infusion of funding, colleges may look to some strategies that have already proven effective.

Strategies to Protect Students and Surrounding Communities at Large Institutions

Large institutions have struggled to return students to campus safely because the size of their student populations posed logistical challenges, they lost revenue from athletics and dining and residence hall fees, and they were forced to spend large portions of their annual budgets to incorporate mitigation measures. Although reopening has certainly proven challenging, some large institutions reopened safely by rigorously testing students, providing resources and financial incentives and shifting to online learning when cases spiked.

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) required students to be tested twice a week. While the college initially struggled to contain cases because some students and faculty flouted social distancing policies, by the end of the semester, the university's strong testing strategy and data-driven approach won out, and the test positivity rate fell below 1%. Other schools, like the University of Notre Dame, University of Wisconsin, Millikin University, Northern Illinois University, and Illinois State University noted UIUC's success and used its testing protocol as a model. Ohio State similarly leaned on testing as a strategy and saw success.

University of California, Davis (UC Davis), a publicly funded university, implemented a host of innovative mitigation measures. UC Davis provided free testing, masks, protective equipment and isolation and quarantine housing not only to all students and faculty but also to members of the surrounding community. This allowed the university to reduce transmission and protect local residents. While other colleges canceled spring break altogether for fear that students would travel and bring back the virus, UC Davis offered students who chose to stay on campus monetary incentives. Other large colleges may consider providing resources to the surrounding community, while incentivizing students to comply with public health protocols.

The University of Michigan and the University of California, Berkeley managed to contain on-campus infection despite increasing cases in the surrounding community by transitioning students to online learning when cases rose. By adapting to changes in local pandemic conditions, these schools managed to return students to campus while protecting the health of students and surrounding communities.

Expanding Partnerships to Address Mitigation Strategies at Institutions with Limited Research Infrastructure

Many institutions that leaned heavily on COVID-19 testing as a mitigation strategy leveraged their in-house research infrastructure. For instance, the UIUC testing program described above relied on a saliva test developed by researchers at the university, and UIUC also assembled an in-house modeling team to guide the university's decisions. Ohio State processed its tests through on-campus laboratories, and Cornell repurposed veterinary labs to conduct emergency COVID-19 testing last fall.

Colleges with limited research infrastructure may face greater barriers to reopening. They are often unable to process tests themselves, which limits their ability to detect and control cases. Despite this disadvantage, some colleges, like Bowdoin College, Delaware State University and The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) managed to reopen safely. Bowdoin partnered with the Broad Institute, a research center that processed tests quickly and recommended safety measures. Similarly, Delaware State University, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), partnered with Testing for America and the Thurgood Marshall College Fund to process tests.

TCNJ, the public liberal arts school that I attended, had originally planned on reopening last fall. Less than a month before students were slated to return to campus, TCNJ was forced to change course, partially because COVID-19 tests were hard to come by and even harder to process. In the spring, however, TCNJ partnered with a local hospital, which allowed it to process thousands of tests quickly and administer vaccines on campus. By collaborating with external partners, colleges with limited in-house lab capacity were able to monitor the number of cases on campus and institute policies that limited infection.

New Opportunities to Support Institutions with Limited Funds

The funding of colleges and universities varies widely, and those more dependent on tuition dollars and/or state and federal funding have faced greater obstacles to reopening. Many private colleges are in severe financial distress due to enrollment declines and tuition discounts, while many public state institutions face significant funding losses because of state budget deficits. For instance, my school, a four-year public university, struggled to balance the budget after a year of COVID-related expenses and limited state and federal funding. It implemented mandatory furloughs, which limited the availability of on-campus services, and dipped into reserves, which will likely affect future students.

The pandemic has particularly affected two-year community colleges, which largely serve low-income, Black, and Latino students. Even before the pandemic, two-year institutions faced significant revenue gaps relative to four-year institutions. Compared to four-year institutions, two-year colleges generally saw greater declines in state support last year, and enrollment at these institutions fell about 10% because the pandemic forced many students to abandon their educational plans.

ARPA funds may help some of these institutions overcome financial challenges. In late July, the U.S. Department of Education allocated $3.2 billion in additional funding to support students at under-resourced and minority-serving institutions, which may help make educational opportunities more equitable.

Working Toward Successful Reopening

While the past year challenged college administrators, faculty, staff and students alike, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Many students—myself included—rejoiced in in-person graduations, and many more eagerly anticipate returning to some semblance of normalcy in the fall. Although many students are likely to be vaccinated, not all colleges will require vaccines, and some students will have medical or religious exemptions. Therefore, mitigation measures continue to be key to a successful reopening.

Funding from the ARPA will likely provide some much-needed relief to colleges that have struggled to contain cases and reopen over the past year. With this funding, colleges might consider implementing strategies highlighted here that worked for other institutions last year, including: developing rigorous testing programs, taking advantage of existing research capabilities, providing incentives and resources to students as well as

community members, partnering with external institutions and remaining flexible to ever-changing pandemic conditions.

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