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Will College Return Normally in the Fall?

Overview:

As the pandemic's effect continues to be felt throughout the entire nation, many are left wondering if there is an end in sight. While the decision of colleges to utilize remote learning for the remaining part of the spring semester was unfavorable for most, social distancing measures and stay-at-home orders made it clear that educational instruction could not continue as they were with in-person instruction. While remote learning has proven the resilience of schools to persevere through significant setbacks, there are still serious limitations to "Zoom University", and like everything else in life, some are suffering more than others. Fine arts students' education is limited without proper studio space and access to materials that the university normally provides for. STEM students that pay costly lab fees are missing out on an integral part of their learning experience.

While some students urge their beloved campuses to reopen in the fall, many others are wary of returning to densely-populated areas like classrooms and dormitories. Colleges must make a decision of whether or not they are ready to reopen in the fall, and the many implications that come with their decision. Colleges that remain entirely online avoid the risk of transmission, but will likely face a decreased amount of returning students, which will only add to the economic hardship they are already suffering from. On the other hand, colleges that choose to reopen in the fall must consider how they will manage and protect students, while also

continuing to abide by state and national guidelines regarding the virus. Obviously, there is a lot of gray area regarding this issue, and no campus will have the exact same answer in regards to this question. The answers that colleges will provide in the weeks to come regarding their “reopening” or lack thereof will be complex, and undoubtedly have a large impact on every single person who steps on campus, whether it be student, professor, custodian, or president.

Hypotheses:

My personal hypothesis regarding the matter, prior to having completed any research, is that universities will return to in-person instruction in the fall but in a modified manner. That is, social distancing and other virus-protection guidelines will be maintained and enforced as much as possible. Courses may be formatted to be partially online. In other words, students will be allowed to return to campus in the fall, but by no means will classes return to schedule as they were in the beginning of the year. My hypothesis for what research will say is that universities will resume normally in the fall, with in-person instruction in full swing.

Research:

To even try to begin to answer this seemingly-simple question, extensive research had to be done. Because research usually did not mention the reopening of colleges specifically, I looked to other sources that aimed at trying to answer the more general question of “when?”—when will this all be over? When will we be able to return to normal life? As one can see, all these questions relate to the reopening of universities, for their reopening in the fall depends on the ability of our nation to manage the pandemic in the months to come. Research is largely in agreement that universities will not be able to open normally in the fall, because the pandemic will be far from extinct and thus colleges must adjust accordingly.

A vaccine is needed to properly end the novel virus, and until then, colleges must not reopen normally in order to reduce the risk of transmission among its students. While companies are making large efforts to produce an effective, accessible, and safe vaccine for the nation, this is no easy feat. It is a timely process to create such a vaccine, and it will take even longer to distribute it to a highly-populated nation like the United States. A report released by Imperial College London wrote that a vaccine should be available “potentially in 12 to 18 months” and until then, “major, society-wide social distancing measures are necessary” (Lambert, 2020). Because a vaccine will not be ready anytime before the fall of 2020, schools must not reopen normally. Students, faculty, and any person on campus will still be able to contract and spread the virus. With “social distancing measures” in place, schools cannot hold large two-hundred-person lectures. Large sporting events will most definitely be put on hold. Without immunity that can only be accomplished safely through vaccination, schools must not and cannot reopen normally in the fall.

Furthermore, other research sources are in agreement that it will not be safe for schools to reopen fully in the fall, since there will still be no guaranteed immunity, even if curves have been flattened. While social distancing and stay-at-home order have been effective in slowing down the spread of the virus, it is just that: a slowing down, not an end. One researcher Wesley Pegden, a mathematics professor at Carnegie Mellon University, argued, “Once transmission rates return to normal, the epidemic will proceed largely as it would have without mitigations, unless a significant fraction of the population is immune (either because they have recovered from the infection or because an effective vaccine has been developed) ...” (Pegden, 2020). Therefore, success-stories of the coronavirus being “conquered” in countries like New Zealand or South Korea are not telling the whole truth: these countries have only managed to avoid

spreading the virus; they are not immune and are just as susceptible to infection as any other country without enforced isolation measures (Schwoerer & Walter, 2020). Likewise, colleges will not be immune to the virus for at least another year, when an effective vaccine is ready for mass distribution. If they want to open safely in the fall, they cannot allow transmission rates to return to normal, for a surge of coronavirus cases is at risk to occur.

While colleges will not be able to reopen as they would in previous years, research also suggests the likely possibility of a modified classroom. In a report released by the American Enterprise Institute, a series of steps was outlined for the U.S., and nations in general, to follow in the path to recovery. An article in *Science News* summarized, “In the second step, individual states can reopen when they have the capacity to identify, test and isolate most people with COVID-19 and their close contacts—but some distancing will still be required” (Lewis, 2020). As the production of COVID-19 tests and antibody tests continues, schools will likely have the resources they need to permit students to return to campus. At the same time, colleges must manage to effectively enforce social distancing measures, which will not be such a simple task, especially for larger and less centralized campuses. Classrooms will have to be adjusted to accommodate these measures with partially online teachings, smaller class sizes, etc. So, while classes will undoubtedly continue in the fall, they will by no means be the same as in the pre-pandemic era.

Moreover, universities are pressured to reopen, even if in a modified manner, to avoid continued economic turmoil like the rest of the nation. Many colleges are already facing great economic loss, with some even threatened with closure (Nadworny, 2020). If colleges decide to continue remote learning for the fall, the risk greater economic loss with a lower number of returning and new students, who do not want to pay the price of four-year university without all

the benefits and resources they should provide for. Pegden's response to the current situation is: "The viability of middle roads, which might attempt to replace suppression efforts with contact tracing while allowing normal social and economic activity, is still debated by experts" (2020). What the "middle roads" consist of exactly will be up to the colleges themselves, but Pegden's comments suggest that universities will reopen in order to avoid financial collapse. However, they will need to be actively involved in monitoring risk of transmission among students, faculty, and workers on campus.

Conclusion:

Across different sources, research seems to agree that nothing will be back to normal by the fall of 2020. Additionally, research has made it clear that the virus will not be eradicated by the fall, so until then colleges must comply with social distancing measures to reduce transmission rates. Thanks to the significant amount of research on COVID-19, colleges can decide to reopen and are aware of the implications that reopening brings: access to testing, space for treatment, enforcement of social distancing, modified classrooms, etc. These implications will not be easy or cost-effective to accomplish, but some colleges have decided to go through with them. What can be ascertained from all of the research combined and to answer the framing question: no, colleges will not reopen normally in the fall.

Although this was not part of my original plan when researching and writing about this topic, my hypotheses now not only have an answer from research, but also an answer from colleges themselves at this point in time. As the spring semester comes to a close, colleges are releasing their decision regarding fall of 2020. My personal hypothesis was largely in agreement with research, as well as the decision of many campuses across the nation. That is, many schools have decided to reopen in the fall but in a modified way. This is only true for some schools,

however. Others have decided to remain completely online and remote for the fall. My research hypothesis clearly did not hold up well. That said, research regarding this matter, as thorough as it tries to be, is difficult to apply to colleges in a nation where power is largely decentralized, and the discretion of managing matters of the pandemic is left largely to the states themselves. Each state is impacted differently by COVID-19 than the next, and so each college must decide which option for reopening is most optimal for them and their students.

Ultimately, what can be learned is that there will be an end to all this, and even if it is not in sight, it is important to take whatever little step forward we can.

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