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Higher Education Imperative during and post-COVID-19 pandemic - College Decisions 2020

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Abstract

As the result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities are facing grim prospects as students hesitate to continue their education or even to return to their college or graduate school. The lowering numbers of students will only exacerbate already existing, before the pandemic started, challenge for many colleges and universities to stay open. Many however will also see their numbers rise.

While colleges and universities across the US try to figure out contingencies on how to resume the new academic year this fall there remain many uncertainties but have few definite answers as to details. Colleges, even in the best of times, often struggle to re-position themselves in order to offer a more relevant curriculum, in a fitting delivery mode - whether traditional classroom, hybrid, or on-line and to attract qualified candidates. Indeed, changing a curriculum is normally a long process in many universities. However, these are not normal times. They require quick adaptation from all parties involved: students, faculty, and administration. This study will propose that academia must very closely observe how businesses will adopt into the new normal and provide necessary value. As universities are the sources of innovation and skilled workforce for regional and national economies.

There is also the role of government in this, depends on how you choose to see it - unfortunate or an opportune - scenario. Whether federal loans, or even better, grants should be available to everyone who upon meeting college admission merits wants to continue their education. This topic is debated widely in the political circles, however, this study will explore this issue based on economic factors alone. It will propose to every stakeholder to view the attainment of higher education by our population as a public good. It should be viewed as roads, infrastructure, or investment in research and development.

Keywords: Higher education, skilled workforce, innovation, COVID-19, pandemic, decision making

At the present time, in mid-2020, many students hesitate to continue their education (Lortie, 2020) or even to return to their college or graduate school. The reality seems even more challenging for the new incoming class. As the pandemic ravages the economy in the spring of 2020 and our routines with it, nothing seems certain, and embarking on the new academic path seems even more uncertain than usual. In the era of exacerbated uncertainty making sensible long-term decisions, in fact, in the case of college students, or aspiring ones, the decisions we are making this summer will have an impact on the entire generation of college-goers (Cauchemez, 2011). They, and their families, face the unknown with various degrees of familiarity with what the college demands and what alternative steps one can take instead.

Some suggest a leap year. Others ask, what if the pandemic ends up lasting two years? Yet, another piece of advice is to join the workforce right away instead. These are all valid concerns, although I would say I can't advise it. Thus far, after every economic recession, depression, or a crash, we have seen a faster or slower economic recovery. The advice you may get may seem sensible for the moment but we cannot plan our life based on what it is, or seems to be, at this moment. The undergraduate and in many cases graduate academic cycle is generally four years long, hence, I propose one needs to think in four, or three, or two, or even one year in case of those returning to the campus this fall as seniors. What will you do at the end of your particular timeline?

Historically after an economic bust follows a boom (Schularick, & Taylor, 2012). How prepared then will those without college education be for their new jobs? Sure, besides earning some money, assuming one finds gainful employment, job experience is helpful as well in finding new jobs, but many employers require completion of higher education. It does not always mean that the job requires it but in this day and age, many employers know that they can expect the applicants to have completed an undergraduate degree. Taking out of the equation the element of self-discovery, learning new things, academic experience, at its very basic not having a college diploma is to disqualify yourself from many, many future job opportunities.

Besides, higher education is historically counter-cyclical to the economy (Carpentier, 2012). When the economy is doing well most people stay on their jobs feeling content. Those employed may also feel emboldened in seeking a promotion or change jobs while focusing on building their careers. When the economy is sputtering, or coming to a near-complete halt, and a slow recovery - as it is now due to the COVID-19 pandemic, those that want to upgrade their skills and qualifications, as well as those who can't find jobs, are heading back to school because they have time, and maybe even not much else to do.

Sure, the appeal of a break after high school may seem irresistible but generally skipping a year between high school and college or between college years to travel or explore the world would be an exciting proposition filled with lots of new opportunities and exploration. While the pandemic is seemingly present in many countries of the world, with existing and anticipated travel restrictions, public sites, parks, and museum closures, quarantine requirements, and the requirement for social distancing, prospects for travel for adventure and discovery is rather limited. Also, the proposition of joining the workforce right after high school, or before completing your college degree, will also be challenging, not to mention the difference in earning power (Wise, 2008), as at the time of this writing more than 30 million Americans are on the unemployment row. Hence finding a decent job with limited preparation and no college degree will also not be easy for many.

As colleges and universities across the US and the globe try to figure out contingencies on how to resume the new academic year this fall there remain many uncertainties but have few definite answers as to details. Colleges, even in the best of times, often struggle to re-position themselves in order to offer a more relevant curriculum, in a fitting delivery mode - whether traditional classroom, hybrid, or on-line and to attract qualified candidates. Indeed, changing a curriculum is normally a long process in many universities. But these are not normal times. They require quick adaptation from all parties involved: students, faculty, and administration. I would suggest that academia must very closely observe how businesses will adopt into the new normal and provide necessary value.

Many traditional brick and mortar universities have well developed online learning and teaching infrastructure. They are able to adopt in this challenging scenario to deliver a quality learning environment and attentive faculty to their students. In many cases, the universities may also allow learning in both traditional classroom and online modes.

This situation will enable students to make progress during the pandemic should the campuses not open completely this fall, and at the later time when we have dealt with the aftermath of the pandemic, students may return to the campuses and to the classrooms. These universities will allow their students to use the "idle" time to learn, develop their skills, and use productively the time of the unknown to make progress towards their degrees.

There is also the role of government in this, depends on how you choose to see it - unfortunate or an opportune - scenario. Federal loans, or even better, grants should be available to everyone who upon meeting college admission merits wants to continue their education. This topic is debated widely in the political circles, however, I want to leave you with this. I would encourage every stakeholder to view the attainment of higher education by our population as a public good. It should be viewed as roads, infrastructure, or investment in research and development. Especially in these challenging and opportune times we, as a nation, need to be able to innovate, compete in every area of economic activity on a global scale to emerge relevant and strong from this crisis. I am sure we can be more successful in this competitive quest as the society that has the skills necessary to contribute to our common good and succeed.

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