

The Case Against Reopening

We all want to be back on campus. But when it comes to plans for the fall, there's only one right decision.

By Stan Yoshinobu | May 14, 2020

✓ PREMIUM

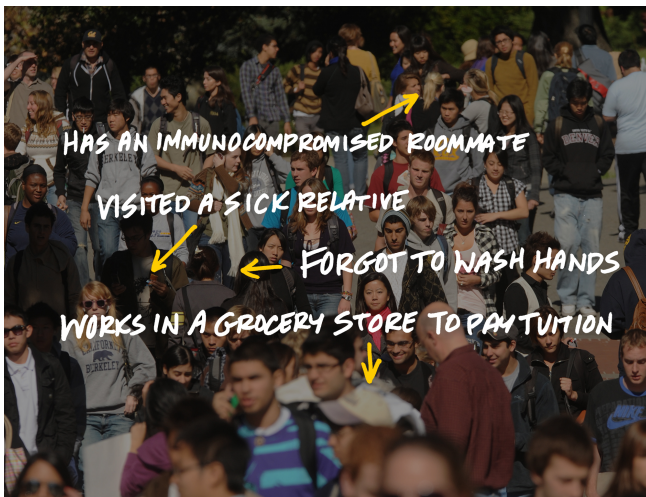


Photo Illustration by The Chronicle

I want to go back to normal. We all do. I have been in lockdown for weeks. I spent my birthday in lockdown. I am Zoomed out. Virtual teaching is not why I became a professor.

Despite all that, we have a moral responsibility to ourselves and one another to make good choices.

According to a *Chronicle* list, most colleges are currently planning to reopen their campuses this fall. What the leaders behind those decisions may not appreciate is that risks are asymmetrical. The damage caused by a contagion on a campus is far greater than the damage caused by virtual teaching. The range of choices colleges have lies, regrettably, between bad and horrific. Teaching via Zoom in our bedrooms with kids at home is not a good situation, but we are in a global humanitarian crisis.

Here's why colleges should not reopen their campuses in the fall, or very likely in spring 2021 as well.

1. We do not have a vaccine. The best estimate of when we might have one (as of this writing) is March 2021, according to the Food and Drug Administration.

Even if that optimistic timetable holds, rolling out more than 300 million vaccine doses poses an enormous manufacturing challenge, one unlikely to be reached before next spring.

2. Income disparities affect access to health care. If a college plans to resume in-person teaching next spring, will it also be able to offer vaccinations for low-income students to ensure that everyone has access to treatment? If not, poor students may be forced to choose between attending college and protecting their health.
3. Testing is still not happening at an adequate level. In California, where I live, we test people who have Covid-19 symptoms. Will we be able to test all of our students before they arrive, after they arrive, and during the semester? In announcing that the California State University system will be mostly online this fall, Chancellor Timothy P. White reportedly told trustees that even if tests were obtainable, weekly testing would cost the system \$25 million per week.
4. Treatments (other than vaccines) are still being tested. They may eventually help, but they are not here yet, and for now it's unwise to count on them. Even if a treatment is shown to be effective in clinical trials, will your college be able to obtain enough to cover all students and faculty and staff members?
5. Simply getting students physically to campuses in the fall would be a significant risk. Imagine the hundreds of thousands of domestic and international students traveling to campuses, many together with parents. How will they do so without spreading the virus? It seems impossible.
6. Once on campus, these hundreds of thousands of students would live in close proximity to one another, often in dorms or apartments with HVAC systems that may well spread the disease. Many of them would eat in dining halls serving thousands of meals per day.

7. Even if your campus is somehow 100-percent coronavirus free, things will get messy. Do we let students go home on weekends? Do we let them visit family members in the hospital? When they return to campus, do we impose a 14-day quarantine?
8. Are students banned from going into the local community? Are community members banned from the campus? What rules, if any, would be made for students who live off campus? How would such rules be enforced? What about for faculty?
9. A thought experiment: How would your college town feel if 20,000 students from China and Italy were to arrive in August? How about if those students come from Los Angeles and New York?
10. What happens during winter break? Do we send students home for three to five weeks in the middle of a potential coronavirus resurgence? Do they quarantine for two weeks when they get home, and again when they return to campus? The length of winter break would make this difficult.
11. Classrooms and especially labs force close contact among students, with no option for proper distancing. With distancing, classrooms that I teach in, which routinely accommodate 35 students, would be "full" at more like six or seven students. Furthermore, in normal times, 10 or 12 people may occupy a single desk over the course of each day. Would we sanitize each desk after every use? How would we hire the hundreds of staff members it would take to do that?
12. Colleges do not have the staff or equipment to administer daily testing and contact tracing. Can such a large staff be hired quickly enough? Can colleges afford it?
13. When instructors get sick, how will the class proceed, especially in courses that require specialized expertise? Will faculty or staff members, like some medical

professionals, be held in reserve, ready to step in for their infected or exposed colleagues?

14. Running a college is like running an all-day concert or sports event every day. As concerts and sports events are canceled, why should the same risk assessment not apply to colleges?

15. Are we going to ban parties? In the unlikely event we can find a legal way to do so, how would such a ban be enforced?

16. Another thought experiment: Student A goes to a "corona party" and is infected with the coronavirus. Student B sits next to Student A in class and gets coronavirus. Student B is in an at-risk group and is hospitalized or dies. Student B had washed her hands, worn a mask, and done everything right. Our public-health measures depend on universal adoption. Because colleges cannot ensure this, how can we rationalize putting at-risk students in harm's way?

17. Education depends on safe learning environments. But now, every time someone sneezes or coughs, the classroom will be infused with fear. How can we expect students to focus on a task or exam when they fear for their safety?

18. Another thought experiment: Assume a college rolls the dice and offers in-person classes this fall, and that its campus becomes the site of an outbreak in October. Thousands get sick and dozens die. What parent would send their kid to Coronavirus U. the following year?

The notion that we must choose between saving lives and keeping our institutions open depends on a false dichotomy. Pandemics are a basket of problems, not an either/or scenario. Dividing issues into coronavirus and noncoronavirus is misleading, since it is one giant set of problems — and, more important, false dichotomies can lead to bad decisions. The major false choice faced by colleges is that of budget versus lives — not that we talk about it in those terms, of

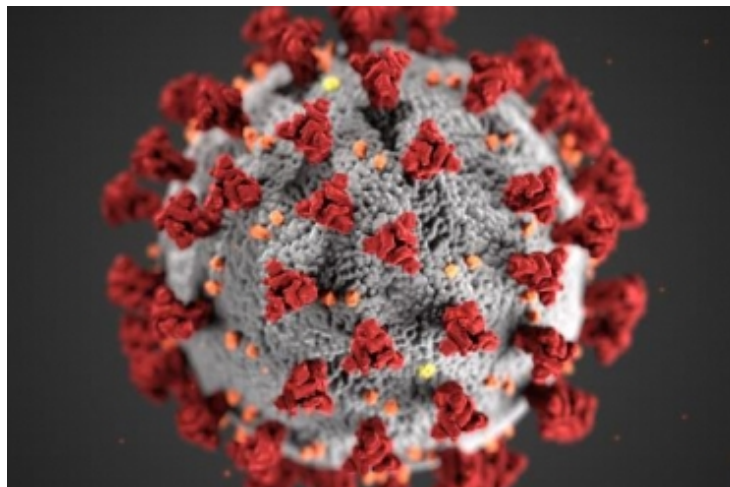
course. We talk of "lower enrollment" and budget shortfalls. When tens of millions of workers file for unemployment in a matter of weeks, college enrollments are going to be affected. Virtual vs. in-person is not the budgetary question here. Our financial problems are caused by a tanking economy, not by our decisions about whether to reopen. We are in something like the Great Depression, and fewer people will be able to afford college. That's just a fact. We should expect lower enrollment.

Budgetary problems are real, and the only plausible solution is for state and federal governments to bail out colleges and universities. We did this for airlines and other industries. We did this for banks during the previous financial crisis. Why not protect the future of education? This is not yet happening — at least not on the scale we need. But its necessity illustrates the folly of chasing enrollment dollars by risking the health of our communities, faculty and staff members, and students. The response to one societal failing should not be to embark upon another.

The desire to reopen overestimates our ability to ignore the bodies in the corner and get on with our work. If members of a college are sick and dying, the campus is not going to feel like a learning environment. Maybe the academic leaders who seek to reopen in the fall are harder and tougher than I am. But if I am losing colleagues and students to the coronavirus, I'm not going to be happy about the next committee meeting. The fear of illness and death would sour the mood, to say the least. I have a hard time imagining a more efficient way to ruin a community than by forcing it to reopen in the middle of a global pandemic.

Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle's* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.



- Here's a List of Colleges' Plans for Reopening in the Fall
- We're Tracking Employees Laid Off or Furloughed by Colleges
- Here's What College Leaders Said in Their Covid-19 Call With the White House ✓ PREMIUM

If faculty and staff members are made to feel disposable, those with outside opportunities could very likely take them. It will be harder for the college to recruit good faculty and staff members, and its quality and reputation will take a hit. Students made to feel unsafe will go elsewhere. An in-person fall semester carries long-term risks that go far beyond budgets.

This is a hard pill to swallow. The key societal mistakes have already been made. We did not invest in pandemic preparedness, we responded slowly and with disorganization, and we have gaps and inequities that are being laid bare. Colleges find themselves in the following situation: We are on a raft, and the river current is leading us to a dangerous section. We like to think that our raft is under our control, independent and autonomous. And in some ways it has been. But the river is society: What happens to the world happens to us. We can't do anything about upstream decisions. We are now left with a set of hard choices.

I don't like virtual college. This will be the most difficult period of our careers. But this is what it takes to live and work during a natural disaster. And we are the lucky ones. Most of us still have jobs and paychecks. Education is fundamentally a social responsibility to our youth — we can be creative and human for our students during this time. We can teach them about morality, community, solidarity, and steadfastness. Going virtual — and staying virtual until it's truly safe to reopen campuses — is how we can respond to a difficult set of circumstances in a way that best reflects our values and missions. It is the moral choice.

Stan Yoshinobu is a professor of mathematics at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo. A version of this essay previously appeared on the author's website .

This article is part of:
Coronavirus Hits Campus

© 2020 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037