

THE REVIEW

Colleges Lost the Moral Authority to Blame Students

Institutions have always profited off risky social behavior. Complaints now ring hollow.

By Holden Thorp

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Undergraduates move off campus this month at the U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

It always starts with Harvard. In July, when the esteemed university wisely announced that it would move all classes online for the fall semester to limit the spread of Covid-19, President Trump lashed out: “I think it’s an easy way out,” he said, “and I think they ought to be ashamed of themselves.”

Harvard didn’t care. But Trump’s comments reverberated through red America, and soon thereafter, public and private universities in red states started announcing plans for their students to return.

Those campus administrators were in a tough spot. After my years in administration at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Washington University in St. Louis (one red-state public, one red-state private), I know how conflicted they were. And the timing didn’t help. In June, the pandemic seemed to be subsiding in the United States. But it came roaring back later in the summer, when a number of colleges were already far down the road toward reopening for in-person instruction.

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I couldn’t be more sympathetic to these administrators. The students said they wanted their campuses reopened. The faculty was cautious. The college towns initially wanted everyone to return to drive the economy, but then pulled back. Republican-appointed trustees and titans of industry were insistent that the universities reopen. Blue-state institutions gradually started announcing a virtual semester. The Ivy League members all bailed, except for Cornell. Trump tweeted incessantly that schools and colleges needed to reopen, and then started insisting on resuming college football, of all things. For the red-state football colleges, there was no way out — the

lifeblood of these institutions flows through the gridiron. Among some of us veteran administrators, this upheaval is known as “being put in the blender.”

The red-state university leaders did the only thing they could do — they put plans together to open their campuses and then pushed the start button. While there was plenty of evidence that this was unlikely to work, it’s hard to fault them. In some states, like Georgia and North Carolina, the governing boards of the university systems gave them no choice but to open. In the end, the only way to convince everyone that a normal fall semester was impossible was to try to have one.

Now we know the answer. Some red-state campuses opened for business only to find that their plans unraveled just a week into the semester, as Covid-19 spread among students. Just like many offices, cruise ships, and Major League Baseball, you can make a workplace safe, but you can’t regulate what goes on outside it. When people are practicing social distancing and wearing masks, the virus doesn’t spread as easily. But when someone leaves this bubble, becomes infected, and then re-enters the bubble, look out. It’s a safe bet now that most colleges will be online in a few weeks, although a few places with a lot of resources for testing or in regions with low levels of outbreak could make it to Thanksgiving.

Although the colleges that reopened made efforts to make their campuses safer, they lamented that they could not stop the viral spread that originated in fraternities and sororities and from other forms of socializing. As campuses shut down, that has led to an awkward situation. Isn’t social culture part of the experience that colleges celebrate (and sell)? Doesn’t that make blaming the students ring hollow?

Colleges have a complicated relationship with student partying. They try to stop it when it gets out of hand, but they embrace it when it’s to their advantage. Every college fund raiser, including me, has accepted a gift after being regaled by a donor with nostalgic memories about epic parties at a frat house or dorm. We all may tangle with Greek life when confronting its racism, guns, gambling,

sexual violence, and drugs, but it's the college president who grabs a pledge form and gets on a plane when a former partyer strikes it rich later on. (UNC-Chapel Hill even has endowed chairs named after fraternities and sororities.)

The pandemic reveals the costs of failing to reckon with that paradox. Colleges may want to blame student partying for not allowing them to reopen successfully, but they have forfeited the moral authority to do so.

When Chapel Hill does well in basketball's Final Four, there are always big parties with bonfires along the college strip on Franklin Street. In 2009, the head of the UNC Burn Center and I did a video warning of the dangers of bonfires. I was new to my role as chancellor, so I thought this was a good idea. Instead, it stoked even more bonfires. When UNC won the NCAA tournament the following Monday night, thousands of people gathered on Franklin Street, celebrating as their team cut down the nets in Detroit. Many were drunk and stoned and jumping into fires. We printed thousands of copies of a photograph of the crowd — complete with the fires — and sent them to our alumni and prospective students. We were saying to them: Look at the great experience our students are having!

How can colleges now blame students in an intellectually honest way for risky behaviors during a pandemic? If the plan is to suddenly teach them that their behavior must change, we're starting from square one.

The system is held in place by a vicious cycle: The partying and other destructive social behaviors go on at a moderate level. When they get out of hand, the president expresses shock and outrage. That mollifies everyone long enough to get back to business. Among the critiques I received was that I wasn't convincing enough when showing my disapproval. But it's hard to be shocked or outraged at something you fully expect.

There is one big difference now. Most university scandals (we used to call them “matters”) break out on one campus at a time, even though the underlying causes are universal. But Covid-19 is truly a systemic crisis. Every college is now confronting the problems arising from the synergistic relationship between “bad” student behavior and the financial welfare of the institution. Even the colleges that are conducting all classes online now will have to confront this when planning for spring and beyond, depending on how vaccination and other aspects of the pandemic play out. Leaving everything as it is and asking students to behave differently is not going to work — and that’s not students’ fault. Those of us who have had the opportunity to break the cycle of partying, shock, and outrage haven’t done so.

Why not choose now as a time to start explaining what college really is? Sure, there are heavy partyers, and there are nerds who end up in the brochures wearing lab coats or sitting in the library. But there are lots of great students of all descriptions, and the current rhetoric glosses over the complicated reality: Most college students don’t raise hell at the frat house, don’t pay full tuition, don’t live on campus, and haven’t been living with their parents during the pandemic. Singling out the partyers just sustains a false and outdated image of how a college works.

Despite the current chorus of curmudgeons, residential education is not going anywhere. The MOOC fiasco proved that. Yes, some didactic material can be delivered online. But walking the hallowed ground of the campus, talking in the dorms until late at night, and — yes — socializing are indispensable parts of college. They should be treated as such rather than swept under the rug until the next crisis comes.

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OPINION

STUDENT LIFE

Holden Thorp

Holden Thorp is editor in chief of the Science family of journals. He was previously the provost of Washington University in St. Louis and the chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



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