Chapter 5

Challenges to US higher education in performing local missions during and after the Covid-19 pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically altered institutions of higher education and their surrounding localities in the United States. The relationship between institutions of higher education and their communities has been strained at times, but colleges and universities and the neighbourhoods, cities and regions in which they are situated are interdependent. They exist within a similar ecosystem in which institutions of higher education, to varying degrees, rely on their surroundings in order to function.

In recent years, we have begun to see an increase in active attempts by institutions of higher education to collaborate with local community-based organisations, governments and other partners to strengthen local communities, and to address issues such as education, health and economic development. A movement to enhance the role of institutions of higher education and other anchor institutions[23] in democratic community partnerships has continued to grow. This development has helped institutions of higher education draw upon their human, intellectual, social, physical and economic capital to reduce inequities in their communities.

The advent of Covid-19 has challenged institutions of higher education to advance their local missions even further. Communities across the US and the globe have been experiencing an extraordinary public health and economic crisis. Various inequities that already existed have been exacerbated. This has become particularly pronounced racially, as Black, Latinx[24] and Native American populations have been

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23. For the concept of "anchor institutions" and the Anchor Institutions Task Force, see AITF 2020.
24. "Latinx" is used as a gender-neutral term for Latin Americans. The US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines "Hispanic or Latino" as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race. See www.census.gov/topics/population/hispanic-origin/about.html, accessed 22 July 2020.

contracting and dying from the virus at higher rates. Many are confronting greater economic instability on top of already vulnerable circumstances.

Institutions of higher education bring a vast array of resources to their local community. In addition to knowledge capital, they bring economic, physical and other forms of capital. During the pandemic, local needs for these resources have become particularly apparent, as colleges and universities provided, for example, physical locations for testing and treatment. The pandemic also revealed the economic interdependency between local communities and institutions of higher education. Many towns and neighbourhoods depend on the purchasing power of university students and staff. While more local residents are expecting resources from colleges and universities, especially for the most under-served populations, institutions of higher education themselves have faced declining tuition, layoffs, a transition to online learning, uncertainty about how to re-open and numerous other disruptions to the fundamental dimensions of how they function (DePietro 2020; German Academic Exchange Service 2020). Just as the pandemic has further illuminated inequities in society, it has highlighted disparities among institutions of higher education (Sorenson Impact Center Staff 2020). Well-endowed institutions are certainly disrupted along with everyone else, but for a significant number of institutions of higher education, particularly those that depend on tuition, the pandemic has caused more serious financial stress. Furthermore, many of the community colleges, historically black colleges and universities,[25] Hispanic Serving Institutions,[26] Tribal Colleges and Universities[27] and various public (and also some private) universities that are economically vulnerable serve many of the more disadvantaged populations. Additionally, higher education and other sectors are facing a racial reckoning, as a racial justice movement has been significantly expanding during the pandemic due to the murder of George Floyd and other African Americans.[28]

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25. According to the U.S. Department of Education, "Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were established to serve the educational needs of black Americans. Prior to the time of their establishment, and for many years afterwards, blacks were generally denied admission to traditionally white institutions. As a result, HBCUs became the principle means for providing postsecondary education to black Americans"; see www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/hq9511.html, accessed 22 July 2020.

26. The U.S. Department of Education says that "A Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) is defined as an institution of higher education that is an eligible institution; and has an enrollment of undergraduate full-time equivalent students that is at least 25% Hispanic students at the end of the award year immediately preceding the date of application"; see https://sites.ed.gov/hispanic-initiative/hispanic-serving-institutions-hsis/, accessed 22 July 2020.

27. Tribal Colleges and Universities are unique institutions that offer opportunities for Native Americans to pursue higher education within their own cultural and regional contexts. According to the U.S. Department of Education, "there are 32 fully accredited Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) in the United States, with one formal candidate for accreditation. Three are in Associate Status"; see https://sites.ed.gov/whiaiane/tribes-tcus/tribal-colleges-and-universities/, accessed 22 July 2020.

28. George Perry Floyd Jr (14 October 1973–25 May 2020) was a Black American man killed by a white police officer during an arrest after allegedly using a counterfeit $20 bill in Minneapolis. Floyd's death triggered global protests against racially motivated violence and police brutality. The shooting death of African-American teen Trayvon Martin in February 2012 and the acquittal of policeman George Zimmerman in 2013 triggered the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which returned to national headlines and gained further international attention after Floyd's death. A couple of other prominent examples of African Americans who were murdered in acts of racist violence in 2020 include Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery.

Amidst the many challenges facing institutions of higher education, society cannot navigate the duration and aftermath of the pandemic without colleges and universities. Many institutions of higher education have been contributing to finding a cure for the virus, serving as sites for testing, advancing testing, graduating medical students early to allow them to help care for patients in local hospitals, developing and distributing personal protective equipment (PPE), housing patients and the homeless, treating patients through medical campuses, raising awareness about pandemics, providing mental health services, publishing pandemic situation information and instructions, and more. They have also been collaborating with local governments on plans for their regions, providing access to technology for children and young people forced to learn remotely, creating new training programmes in fields likely to grow due to the pandemic, and providing technical services to small local businesses and beyond. In public health and many other realms, institutions of higher education have been significantly contributing to their communities. The Anchor Institutions Task Force has been gathering examples of how colleges, universities and other anchor institutions have been advancing their local missions amidst Covid-19, some of which are shared herein (AITF 2020).

IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES TO US HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

As institutions of higher education and their communities are interdependent, they have both faced simultaneous challenges from the pandemic (Gavazzi 2020). While colleges and universities have faced tremendous disruptions and economic insecurities, nearby communities have been experiencing repercussions of these changes in addition to other difficulties due to the crisis. Institutions of higher education, which drove local economies in some instances, suddenly were no longer providing economic activity, as dormitories closed and students, faculty and staff were no longer actively purchasing locally (Nicholson and Semmler 2020; Anonymous 2020). As many businesses have been forced into permanent closure, not having been able to withstand months without revenue, the nature of communities around colleges and universities has been gradually altered for the short term.

At the time of writing, as the autumn semester 2020 approaches, colleges and universities are confronted with determining how to resume activities. Since the virus continues to spread in the US, many institutions will have to continue operating virtually to a substantial extent, which will further adversely impact local economies. The US is clearly experiencing greater difficulty than some other countries in managing the pandemic. The US never had a national strategy to shut down or to adhere to particular guidelines (e.g. wearing masks). Each state has developed its own policies for shutting down as well as re-opening, which has led to some confusion. This considerable variation in policy and practice has also led to recent outbreaks, which have influenced decisions by colleges and universities for the autumn semester 2020. For example, institutions typically join athletic "conferences" such as the Ivy League or Big Ten for regular competitions, under governing bodies like the National Collegiate Athletic Association, National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics or United States

Collegiate Athletic Association, and some athletic conferences have decided to forego intercollegiate sports, influenced by the country's inability to control the spread of the virus (Nietzel 2020).

A public health crisis on a campus can also affect the community. If students and staff contract the virus, their contagion can transcend campuses to spread in the community as well, and vice versa. Therefore, the combined public health and economic effects of the pandemic can directly affect the local community (World Bank 2020). One area in which we have seen recent growth in higher education–community partnerships has been in institutions' deliberate efforts to hire and buy locally. The pandemic has significantly harmed institutions' finances, straining their ability to employ local workers and purchase from local businesses.

It is important to reiterate that the financial constraints faced by colleges and universities are not equal. Those without large endowments (Rosenberg 2020) are more vulnerable. Declining public budgets during the pandemic have led to cuts in public higher education (Kilgore 2020). These public institutions typically play significant roles in serving their local communities, as many of them serve largely low-income areas and communities of colour, and they tend to have limited resources. For public urban universities, such as Rutgers University–Newark (Cantor et al. 2019), strengthening local, lower-income communities is central to their mission. Community colleges also enrol a higher proportion of local residents. Overall, these public colleges and community colleges are more severely affected by the pandemic because of their vulnerable financial conditions and their limited access to resources, yet these are the institutions upon which under-served communities tend to rely. Additionally, some private colleges and universities are facing a looming financial crisis due to sharp declines in investment income and tuition revenue (Anderson et al. 2020).

LONG-TERM IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON US ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR LOCAL PARTNERS

The pandemic's impact on higher education and surrounding communities is significant, and likely to be long-lasting and far-reaching. In many communities, populations that were already vulnerable are now even more precariously situated. Increased unemployment will not lead to the re-employment of all who lost jobs during the pandemic. Some industries (retail, hospitality, travel) are forever altered by this crisis, which will lead to further layoffs (McKinsey and Company 2020). Lower-income children and youth, who were thrust into virtual learning, will be further behind in their schooling.

Some have not paid rent or mortgage for months, thanks to a moratorium on these payments. But this reprieve, along with extended unemployment benefits, has an approaching expiration date. Thus we could see noticeable increases in homelessness (Kendall 2020). As some communities, especially communities of colour, have been disproportionately affected by the virus, evidence is surfacing about the long-term health consequences of those who contracted Covid-19 and recovered. The US suffered from propaganda at the highest levels, suggesting the pandemic was over in May 2020. But the reality is that the pandemic rages on at the time of

writing (mid-July 2020). It is still spreading, and it remains challenging for those who are unable to socially distance. This is often the case in lower-income communities.

Higher education, a sector that is not known for rapid change, will have to adapt quickly. In order to fulfil their missions, higher education institutions will have to be creative about how to engage students, conduct research and serve communities. As industries and demand for goods and services continue to evolve, institutions of higher education will have to take note and reshape curricula where necessary.

As the breadth and depth of systemic racism has been so apparent in recent months, colleges and universities will have to be better equipped to leverage their resources to reduce racial inequities as well as transform themselves into anti-racist institutions. Institutions of higher education will have to be equipped to meet the needs of all of their students and develop more focused efforts to meet the needs of students of colour and recognise economic disparities in their midst. They will have to be able to, for example, address the digital divide on their campuses as well as in their communities if they hope to be equitable entities.

The pandemic has led to federal policies and policy ideas that have influenced some aspect of diversity and inclusion on campuses. The recently introduced, and somewhat quickly rescinded, immigration policy that requires international students to leave the US if their campuses are conducting mostly remote learning is one more example of how institutions of higher education have been targeted by federal policy (Perper 2020). There has been some discussion at the federal level about withdrawing funding for institutions of higher education that do not re-open in person in autumn 2020. The language of "re-opening in person" has been used by the Trump administration on various occasions, referring to a desire for schools at all levels to have students and teachers physically on campus and in classrooms for face-to-face teaching and learning. The science suggests that restoring total in-person education to the extent prior to the pandemic would make classrooms spreaders of the virus. But external policy (or the threat thereof) is pushing for something else. US higher education has been periodically ensnared in tense exchanges with certain policy makers over a range of issues. The relationship between higher education and state and federal governments will be a major long-term priority because colleges and universities will be challenged to do more with less. It seems it is more expensive to add more frequent and widespread disinfection, spacing in classrooms, plexiglass, PPE and so on. Yet, the policy conversation is about cutting higher education. It appears that the long term will include strained budgets for institutions of higher education, coupled with increased expectations.

External communities, having been confronted with their own economic devastation, will need colleges and universities and other anchor institutions more than ever. Local schools will need external partners, such as institutions of higher education, to help strengthen educational outcomes and overall social mobility, especially for the most under-served children and youth (The Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania 2020). Local economies will need institutions of higher education to bring an infusion of resources after months of shutting down.

But this is increasingly looking like more of a long-term reality, because much of higher education will be conducted online until the end of the year.

How colleges and universities engage in community partnerships has already been significantly revised. In many ways, such partnerships have been forced to operate virtually. Overall, in the face of various challenges, institutions of higher education in the US have been responding to the pandemic on numerous levels. Here are a few examples drawn from the ongoing research of the Anchor Institutions Task Force.

HOW SOME US HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS HAVE RESPONDED TO COVID-19 IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

Some universities have deployed clinical faculty to local hospitals to help confront the pandemic

At Yale University, 1400 clinical faculty in the School of Medicine have been serving as front-line health care providers, treating the patients at Yale New Haven Hospital.[29]

Some universities have been manufacturing/collecting medical equipment and supplies to meet local needs

The Robotics programme faculty of Lake Area Technical College, a community college, has been assisting health care providers and first responders by using its 3D printers to produce protective face shields and facemasks. The college also called for physical and financial resources to support its community efforts.[30]

Some higher education institutions have provided testing services for local communities

Howard University Faculty Practice Plan began offering free coronavirus testing at its Benning Road Clinic on 5 May 2020. The testing site was funded by a grant from the Bank of America and provides a critical resource in an area that needs testing the most. The Bank of America has awarded a US$1 million grant to the Faculty Practice Plan (HUFPP) to improve access to Covid-19 testing in the diverse Washington, DC communities located east of the river.

Some university libraries continue to serve local community

Since the pandemic outbreak, the University of New Mexico Libraries have continued to provide services to the University and the wider Albuquerque community. From curb-side checkout services to computer rentals and online research consultations, the university libraries have been pivoting to the needs of their users (Velasquez and Whitt 2020).

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29. See https://news.yale.edu/2020/04/14/yale-stands-new-haven-responding-covid-19, accessed 22 July 2020.
30. See www.lakeareatech.edu/covid-19/, accessed 22 July 2020.

In the re-opening stage of the pandemic, universities planned to adapt to various safety measures, such as distancing measures and virus testing

In May 2020 Rice University announced its plans to re-open the campus for the autumn 2020 semester, which would begin in mid-August with the full population on campus, but with safety protocols in place. Such measures include contact tracing, precautionary isolation of individuals with possible exposure to the virus and testing protocols. Appropriate social distancing measures will be required. Classes are to be delivered in dual-mode, available in person and remotely. Similar to other university models, Rice's autumn semester will end before Thanksgiving break (end of November), with no autumn break.

Some universities have helped local community organisations to recruit volunteers

The University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing had posted a message on its website[31] asking for those interested in helping to contribute directly to two of its community partners (Families Forward Shelter and Puentes de Salud).

Coronavirus funds have been established to support community-based organisations and address other matters

University of California San Francisco has created the UCSF Covid-19 Response Fund to support its efforts of co-ordinating with colleagues across the Bay Area and northern California to care for patients while also protecting the health of their faculty, staff, students, patients and visitors.

Harvard University announced the formation of a grant programme to provide emergency funding to non-profit organisations and community groups serving the Allston-Brighton neighbourhood of Boston. The Harvard University Allston-Brighton Emergency Response Grant will allow recipient organisations to quickly mobilise and respond to the needs of the community during this unprecedented global health crisis.

Some universities have addressed the urgent need for demographic data and impact surveys during the pandemic

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, faculty members of the School of the Public Affairs and Administration (SPAA), Rutgers University – Newark, have been working with the Urban League of Essex County to assess the impact of Covid-19 by surveying Newark residents.

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31. See www.nursing.upenn.edu/news-events/coronavirus-covid-19-information-and-resources/, accessed 14 July 2020.

The Association of American Medical Colleges is calling for a national standardised data-collection system to accurately capture information about race, ethnicity, social conditions and environmental conditions affecting the spread of illness.

Universities have organised events to help students explore issues of community compassion during pandemic

At the University of Texas at San Antonio, the Civic Leadership Integrative Seminar class, an undergraduate course in UTSA's College for Health, Community & Policy,[32] partnered with SA2020[33] and Compassionate San Antonio[34] to host the event "Compassion in the Time of Covid-19: San Antonio Community Conversations" from 2 to 18 April 2020 (Bustamante 2020).

Some universities have provided remote technical assistance for local businesses and organisations

At the University of San Diego, the current inventory of faculty implementing online community engagement continued. To help community-based organisations and local residents, faculty continued to have students provide critical support functions such as marketing and communication support, data analysis and programme impact, compiling court briefs for asylum seekers, court case transcription services and online fitness and wellness courses for seniors.

Some university leaders have shared experience in discussions on Covid-19 and the future of higher education

Mary Schmidt Campbell, President of Spelman College, an HBCU, has shared Spelman's experience in community engagement with educational leaders at a conference. In the last year, Spelman students have made a marked improvement in the literacy levels of Atlanta middle school students by volunteering as tutors in SpelReads,[35] the college's literacy programme with local schools. Dr Campbell recommended that higher education institutions share resources and collaborate to share costs and improve efficiencies for the Atlanta University Center Consortium.

THE PANDEMIC AND THE FUTURE

The pandemic has had an impact on the non-profit sector as a whole. Many of the community partners to colleges and universities are also making do with limited finances. Institutions of higher education have been thrust into accelerating their digitalisation processes, relying not only on teaching and learning online, but engaging the community virtually as well. In the future, we will likely see practices such as

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32. See https://hcap.utsa.edu/, accessed 14 July 2020.
33. See www.sa2020.org/, accessed 14 July 2020.
34. See https://sacompassion.net/, accessed 14 July 2020.
35. See www.spelman.edu/about-us/news-and-events/news-releases/2020/01/21/spelreads-helps-atlanta-public-school-students-improve-reading-skills, accessed 22 July 2020.

collaboration on K-12 education,[36] technical assistance to local businesses, and other common forms of higher education – community partnerships, as online endeavours.

Certainly, the need to close the digital divide in local communities and on campuses will become a central component of higher education–community partnerships. At many levels, the pandemic has exacerbated systemic racism and other inequities. These realities have always loomed over higher education–community partnerships. But they are now more important than ever (Bradley 2020).

As the economy continues to change, placing greater pressure on lower-income communities, institutions of higher education must be prepared to provide education and training, particularly in growing industries, to assist access to employment and overall social mobility in their communities. Providing higher education opportunities for under-served communities will be fundamental to the longer-term sustainability of many of the neighbourhoods and cities that host colleges and universities.

Overall, institutions of higher education will have to demonstrate their role as anchor institutions in their communities more than ever in order to help communities rebuild in the wake of the pandemic. The various ways in which colleges and universities have been engaging in their communities in recent months is only the beginning. In all aspects of life – education, health, economic development and others – disparities have deepened. The value that institutions of higher education can bring to society in the years to come centres on their ability to strengthen the most disadvantaged populations, through democratic community partnerships. This pursuit must not only draw upon higher education, it must be a function of collaboration across sectors to harness resources that can transform lives and livelihoods. Recent months have also demonstrated the depths of the systemic dimensions of societal inequalities and disparities. Higher education must not only engage locally, but directly confront the pervasive systems, internally and externally, that drive inequality. It is clear that societies with such tremendous disparities cannot withstand a pandemic, nor function well after one.

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36. K-12 stands for schooling from kindergarten through to twelfth grade. The term is used in the United States and Canada, and possibly other countries.

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