

California State University, the largest public university system in the US, closes campuses for the fall semester

By Anthony del Olmo
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In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, universities and colleges throughout the US are grappling with the new economic and social reality as uncertainty mounts over reopening campuses in the fall. In March, K-12 schools, colleges and universities closed across the country, making frantic efforts to push educators to move all instruction online. Campuses are debating between continuing online learning in the fall or reopening the campuses with social distancing and other measures.

The California State University (CSU) system, the largest four-year university system in the US with over 480,000 students across 23 campuses, announced this week that classes will almost exclusively remain online, and campuses will remain closed in the fall except for exceptional cases, potentially until the end of the coming academic year. CSU is the first prominent public university system to declare that campuses will remain closed in the fall.

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that of the dozens of schools that have shared their plans for the fall so far, nearly 65 percent have indicated that they plan for campus reopenings with in-person instruction, including the University of Arizona (44,000 students), New York University (51,000 students), and University of Michigan (45,000 students), among others. However, the majority of the 4,000 two-year and four-year public and private colleges and universities across the country have yet to announce definite plans.

University of California, San Diego, which plans to reopen in the fall, is the first to begin a systemwide voluntary testing and tracing program for the 5,000 students who have remained on campus. If the plan is successful in testing over 60 percent of the campus population each month, it will continue with testing and in-person instruction in the fall. This would mean

regularly testing the entire 68,000 student and staff population. The university has been able to implement the \$10 million per year program due to its extensive healthcare facilities, which are bolstered by billions of dollars in research funding, but this is not the case across most university campuses or the country as a whole.

The lockdowns imposed due to the pandemic have upended academic life for the roughly 20 million students at colleges and universities throughout the US, and the nearly 200 million across the world. Students in the graduating class of 2020 were forced to either complete their degrees without a graduation ceremony or attend one online, with their academic or career plans changed completely or hanging in the balance.

The rapid and haphazard move to online classes in March forced both students and teachers to adapt to a new learning platform. Classes in the arts and sciences that require lab or in-person work have been suspended. Virtual learning itself comes with its own challenges for students with learning disabilities, those who have less access to technology or reliable internet, and an overall lower quality education experience compounded by the inability to meet with teachers or classmates in person. With campuses closed, so too are cultural and social aspects of college life including sports, theater, and the arts, as well as guest speaker and career fair opportunities.

The situation for international students is even more precarious as many are barred from returning to their home countries and families, while campus dormitories remain shut down. Homeless students and those who live in their cars face a similar challenge.

Online petitions have sprung up at several large universities with students demanding a partial reinstatement of tuition payments for the spring and a lowering of tuition in the fall due to the reduction of

available resources on campus if classes remain virtual. Reflecting the immense burden of student loan debt which stands at over \$1.5 trillion, and already overpriced degrees and rising tuition, students are weighing the cost benefit of attending classes online, taking the year off, or even considering transferring to less expensive schools. This is especially true for international or out-of-state students, who usually pay much higher tuition rates.

The pandemic is unfolding at the peak of the admissions process where graduating high school students are just now choosing which college they want to attend and may now be making second choices for the same reasons. University administrators are also considering fluctuating enrollment in the fall with revenue repercussions, by extending admissions deadlines into the summer and extending offers to wait-listed students in an effort to fill freshman classes. According to *Inside Higher Ed*, there will be a predicted 15 percent drop in enrollment nationwide for the 2020-21 school year, amounting to a \$23 billion revenue loss.

Meanwhile, high school juniors applying for colleges have foregone the routine SAT and ACT testing as test dates have been cancelled, as well as Advanced Placement (AP) subject tests. In response, the SAT and ACT announced plans for digital versions of the tests, with some colleges removing the requirement altogether, such as the University of California system.

Prior to the pandemic, students and youth had been facing increasingly uncertain conditions with higher unemployment and fewer job prospects than previous generations, compounded by astronomical debt as a result of higher tuition. High costs of living in wealthier areas of the country have seen a simultaneous increase in homelessness among students, with many forced to live in their cars while studying.

While students and universities are struggling to make ends meet during the crisis, the ruling class is exploiting it for its own selfish interests.

Following the bailout of Wall Street and major corporations to the tune of trillions of dollars, both Democrats and Republicans are moving to end lockdown measures and force millions to return to work under unsafe conditions without proper protective measures in place.

In the face of towering unemployment levels and dwindling state resources, states are declaring budget cuts in education, healthcare and other social services, prompting governors to request further federal assistance, which the Trump administration has so far denied. These

budget cuts are leading to the furlough of thousands of teachers and staff as campuses remain closed.

As is the case nationwide, there is still inadequate testing and contact tracing available to safely reopen workplaces and schools. At a Senate committee hearing on May 12, leading coronavirus expert Dr. Anthony Fauci explicitly warned against the rapid reopening of schools and businesses without sufficient testing. He made clear that no vaccine or medical treatment will exist for COVID-19 by August to reopen schools and universities. Reflecting the consensus of epidemiologists and public health experts, without testing and proper measures in place, a disastrous resurgence of the disease would lead to “unnecessary suffering and death.”

Despite the warnings within his own administration, Trump remains insistent on “reopening” the US economy with a particular focus on schools. “I don’t consider our country coming back if the schools are closed,” he told reporters on Wednesday.

The coronavirus pandemic has further exposed the criminal character of the ruling class in its insatiable drive for profits at the expense of public safety. The money exists to fund education and to implement policies which would protect students and workers. However, it remains trapped in the private fortunes of the financial aristocracy. The wealth accumulated by Jeff Bezos, the richest person in the world, soared over \$25 billion in the first four months of this year alone. The solution to the pandemic requires the reallocation of society’s resources to meet human need and not private profit.

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