

A Journal of Health Care Finance Special Commentary

**Innovating to Mitigate Adverse Financial Implications
of COVID-19's Effects on Higher Education**

Christopher Gaeta, EMT-B

The COVID-19 global pandemic has changed the educational landscape for the foreseeable future. The marked public health, economic and societal challenges stemming from the virus' spread has resulted in substantial strains to the financial and educational frameworks in the United States.

Forced to adopt best practices to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, higher educational institutions closed throughout much of the United States for the Spring 2020 semester. The brief three months between March and May marked the beginning of financial challenges faced by universities switching to online courses and losing tens of millions of dollars in room, board, and athletics revenues. West Chester University, for example, has estimated a \$100 million loss as a direct result of the virus' impact on their community.¹

As the fall 2020 semester approaches, a vaccine will likely not be available before the beginning of the term. As such, universities will need to ensure that safe health policy measures are in place while simultaneously continuing to be keenly aware of the likely financial hardships at hand. To mitigate financial harm while achieving the tall order of community public health stewardship, novel innovations to efficiently allocate resources both on and off of campuses are imperative.

Three key recommended innovations are vital for nearly all institutions to enact: (1) robust partnerships with external health entities, (2) on-campus collaboration with community emergency response groups, and (3) refined educational outreach. These are efforts that can address the financial implications of the public health emergency on collegiate campuses.

¹<https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewdepietro/2020/06/02/impact-covid-19-tuition-finance/#69148a924b88>

To start, external health partners can offer community safety modalities that few universities can offer from their own campus' current resources. Indeed, many institutions have on-site health care providers from nurses and counselors to physicians; however, the ability to test people, organize a contact-tracing system and follow all of the acute and preventive cases that will present regardless of COVID-19 will quite likely stretch health centers too thin. Alternatively, it would benefit schools to innovatively collaborate with off-campus entities to decrease the costs to treat and prevent COVID-19 cases as well as increase availability of care through telehealth integration of on-campus health services.

For example, abundant rapid testing will be needed to have weekly dispensing, collection and analysis of results for many communities. Larger providers like CVS Health offer resources to meet the needs of universities while telehealth companies like Lemonaid Health are able to augment these care plans with affordable telehealth follow-ups, thereby avoiding unnecessary exposure on campuses and in medical facilities.

Moreover, I anticipate psychological and counseling services on campus to face strained resources coming into the fall. Before the pandemic, it was evident that psychological services on college campuses were in increasing demand and already experienced drawbacks in terms of on-campus counseling services.² Novel innovative partnerships with organizations like TalkSpace are excellent ways to appropriately address this increase in mental health support on college campuses.

In addition, universities should seek to take advantage of a vital on-campus resource for the upcoming fall term: student volunteer medical providers such as Emergency Medical Services (EMS) squads. Efforts to engage student volunteers is unequivocally a financially sound proposition that can further bolster a safer and economically sound response to the pandemic. Many schools operate student volunteer Emergency Medical Response services on campus. These providers would serve as valuable resources to assist with implementation of community protocols like contact tracers, student voices in administrative decisions and education of the student body on the importance of best practices to curb the spread of the virus.

To this end, educational outreach is perhaps a less appreciated means of enacting a financially and civically-minded responding to this crisis. The socio-cultural implications of continued educational outreach is not just impactful as to the information itself; there is benefit stemming from the practice of informing community members of the massive burden the school is facing. Relaying information such as the number of tests completed, resources allocated and other similar metrics can represent a powerful means of conveying the extent to which schools are responding to the pandemic.

The behavioral nudge to reinforce the fact that the virus has impacted the college/university as a whole will help to avoid misinformation about the extent to which college finances have been affected. Furthermore, educating university staff and students on the importance of social distancing and other health related best practices will allow decreased spread on campus in addition to mitigating the strain on the health system in the local community.

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/10/the-most-popular-office-on-campus/504701/>

In synthesis, we are not certain of the extent to which colleges and universities will be impacted by the virus in the coming months; yet, we can certainly prepare for and employ the critical thinking and innovative approaches to solve or at least diminish these multifaceted challenges. As a student, provider and active policy advocate I foresee the complexities ahead in preparing for the lingering impacts of COVID-19. Nonetheless, I believe that the inevitable challenges can be met with the pragmatic behavioral, structural and medically appropriate calls-to-action on campuses across the country.

About the Author

Christopher Gaeta is a student at Swarthmore College. A Stanford University Innovation Fellow, Gaeta has been featured in US News and Yahoo Finance for his insights on healthcare innovation and emergency medical research. He is an active contributor to EMS World magazine and has authored several dozen medical publications while an undergraduate at Swarthmore.