

## Chapter 2

# Recovering Higher Education During and After the Pandemic

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter discusses the economic, academic, and socioemotional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on low-income students and the institutes of higher education that serve them. Income-based inequities among students have been amplified significantly by the economic recession and the shift to remote learning. This chapter examines the federal and state-level plans that aim to address these inequities by providing/redistributing aid to universities. Additionally, updated pedagogies that are attuned to the needs of remote/hybrid learning are proposed, since keeping student motivation (and graduation rates) high will be a priority for universities as they recover from this pandemic. Universities must therefore provide their students with the sufficient monetary, academic, and emotional support needed to ensure both their students' and their own success.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Covid-19 pandemic transformed day-to-day life by dramatically limiting physical interaction and forcing offices and schools to assimilate and adopt a virtual model — one characterized by daily video calls and a digitization of traditionally in-person processes. Unfortunately, the modern technology that allows virtual interactions to occur instantaneously has never been used to emulate physical interaction to such a great extent before. Consequently, higher education must now prove its adaptability as it

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undergoes dramatic changes that make it necessary to update policies and procedures. Students must similarly deal with the effects of the economic collapse and the transformation of the education system.

Now that education has largely shifted online, high-speed internet connections and reliable devices have become a prerequisite to learning. This places an even greater burden on economically disadvantaged students. Essentially, the widening digital divide and the rising cost of college has made higher education virtually inaccessible to those who need it the most. Masses of low-income students are now dropping out of higher education, feeling discouraged by turbulent family finances and declining mental and emotional states. This growing inequity is a known crisis in higher education, but universities are struggling to acquire adequate funding for the monetary and socioemotional support their students need.

### **THE DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL DIVIDE**

Many low-income students underwent the pandemic-induced learning shift without access to the bare necessities that online learning requires: a reliable internet connection and a personal device. Students with unstable internet connections struggled to join class video calls and access resources on their school's virtual learning platforms. Without the proper means to view, complete, or submit their schoolwork, students experienced difficulty understanding fundamental concepts and felt discouraged from participating in class. Meanwhile, students without *any* access to the internet/devices simply could not participate in any type of online learning environment. Many such students dropped out of higher education since they could no longer go to campus to access these essentials. While some schools and universities have been able to lend their students Chromebooks and temporary internet hotspots, many simply do not have the resources to do so. Concerningly, an analysis of data collected by the US Census Bureau reveals that in 2020, 4.4 million American households with school-aged students still lacked consistent access to a computer, and 3.7 million households lacked access to the internet (USAFacts, 2020). These appalling inequities exhibit the considerable disadvantages that low-income students faced in the transition to online learning. And while this socioeconomic divide in education was already present in the form of limited access to extracurriculars, tutoring programs, and updated technologies, the shift to a virtual environment exacerbated the learning divide by decreasing the accessibility of the most basic component of school: regular instruction-time. Since low-income students could neither hire private tutors nor attend expensive summer programs before the pandemic, they relied more heavily than other students on this basic instruction-time.

Predictably, the social and physical disconnect has had a devastating impact on students' academic performances. Besides the constant distractions they face in online learning environments (while under little to no supervision), they also experience difficulty contacting their professors with questions and concerns. Whereas they could previously meet their professors between classes and attend in-person tutorials when falling behind in class, virtual "office hours" lack the organic nature of traditional student-teacher interaction, ultimately leading to a sizeable decrease in comprehension and an increasing amount of failing grades (Brinkley, 2020). Data collected from prominent high school districts across the nation exhibit an exponential increase in failing grades attributed to online learning, displaying failing rates that are as high as 40% in some districts (The Associated Press, 2020). Similar trends were observed in universities and institutes of higher education, and many colleges resorted to Pass/Fail grades in the 2019-2020 school year since grades had dropped concerningly below average. Naturally, students that

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