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# Coronavirus pushes classes online, hurting at-risk students [Opinion]

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As coronavirus spreads across the United States, institutions of higher education are facing some tough choices.

How should schools keep faculty, staff and students safe, while also continuing to provide educational opportunities?

Should face-to-face classes be suspended — as they have been

at Rice University this week — in favor of online classes so that individuals can maintain the “social distance” that medical authorities have advised?

Should campuses be closed altogether so that the virus does not spread further in densely populated communities?

If schools close, how does instruction continue so that students can finish out their semester, not lose credit hours or money, and make it to graduation on time?

The solutions, however, are not as simple as flipping a switch and opening up a message board in Canvas or Blackboard, or telling people not to return from spring break.

Many students at our institutions of higher education, for example, experience housing or food insecurity. For some, their dorm room, or their car, or a friend’s couch is “home” — they have nowhere else to go to if a campus closes. Some eat only because of campus food pantries, the generosity of friends, or efforts to provide nutrient rich, cheap meals in the dining halls. There are countless international students who cannot go home, even if they have the means to do so, because of visa complications or quarantines in other countries. Many students — of all ages — depend on campus clinics and counseling services as their only source of health care. All of these things are in jeopardy if a campus closes.

Whether or not a campus closes or simply changes some of its methods of instruction, there are still major uncertainties at play. Colleges and universities cannot simply cease instructional operations — semesters are underway; students have often

taken on debt to pay for their classes; people are counting on earning credit hours this spring to ensure a timely path to graduation.

The administration at my own college in rural Illinois has urged us to be agile and to think of ways to weather disruption to our usual, face-to-face teaching practices. Taking our classes online seems to many observers to be an easy solution to this problem, but again, it's a more complicated situation than it seems at first glance.

There are real and pressing issues related to the digital divide to consider. Students don't always have access to computers or printers off campus; many students rely on their phone to access course readings and learning management software. They have low data plans; they have old phones that can't handle complex software; they don't have ready access to WiFi at home, or they're being warned away from places where they might usually get WiFi, like local coffee shops. Even when students have a laptop and a strong WiFi connection, there are students with learning disabilities who find processing text online incredibly difficult. These pressures will fall on our most marginalized students most heavily.

Then there's the question of the professors, lecturers and graduate instructors who must provide the structure of a course to these students. There are a vast cohort of educators who are well-trained and well-practiced in online learning. They do an incredible job of providing a rich educational experience to students delivered through college learning management systems or using apps like Zoom and Hypothesis. They have

spent years honing their craft and have thought about ways to make online spaces challenging, supportive and dynamic.

I am, however, trained and practiced in face-to-face instruction. My 26-year teaching career has been in physical classrooms of all shapes and sizes. I'm adept at running discussions, organizing small group work and creating activities that give students the opportunity to collaborate with each other on posters, timelines, debates and presentations. I don't lecture, so I can't simply record myself for YouTube (and use that platform's ability to close-caption lectures), expecting that students will tune in from home. My colleagues in lab sciences or studio art or dance have particular, possibly insurmountable, challenges in translating their teaching online.

Providing good online learning means being trained and supported with time and resources to become good at the job, but resources are not distributed equitably across all institutions, and we have so little time to become ready. Support staff in libraries, IT departments and centers of teaching and learning are as overwhelmed as instructors try to rise to this moment. And adjunct faculty, in particular, are being asked to take on extra labor for which they will likely see no compensation.

None of these challenges are insurmountable. As educators, we're committed to doing the very best we can at all times to provide meaningful learning environments for our students, and using platforms like Twitter, we're exchanging information, best practices and new ideas every minute.

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