

Covid on Campus

APM Reports Transcript

Billboard

Stephen Smith: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary.

Ron DeSantis: Having our universities operating again is very, very important.

Colleges and universities around the country are under pressure to reopen.

Gerard Albert III: We're in pretty much the epicenter of the state for the outbreak.

Audrey Dowling: I don't know if I want to be in a situation where I have to worry about flying home at a moment's notice.

Jonathan Gibraltar: It's going to be this process of continually having to test people.

Martha Meyer: Faculty should not be compelled to return to campus if they have a health concern. Period, end of story.

But online classes aren't always an option.

Anne Kress: We've turned our parking lots into free Wi-Fi hotspots, because students might have a laptop, but they can't afford the internet access to use it.

Some students who drop out may never finish. And some colleges won't survive this.

Gibraltar: If we don't have room and board revenue, we won't have enough revenue to operate the campus.

Coming up, Covid on Campus, from APM Reports. First this news.

Part 1

Stephen Smith: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary Covid on Campus. I'm Stephen Smith.

(Music)

In early June, when no one could come together for memorial services, people gathered online for a virtual goodbye.

Minister: Of course, as long as there are those of us who could tell the story, MacMurray will never really be gone. Because she lives in our hearts.

It was a funeral service not for a person - but for a college. There was a montage of photos - green lawns, brick buildings, students gathering in the chapel, football players in red jerseys.

Minister: Thank you for joining us for this online service. We hope it has provided an opportunity for you to reflect on your connection with MacMurray College as we join with the broader community of those who have been formed in this place...

(Music)

MacMurray College...a small liberal arts school in central Illinois. After 174 years of producing teachers, social workers, sign language interpreters, and Methodist ministers, MacMurray was closing its doors. The cause of death: financial starvation.

(Music)

MacMurray was already faltering when Covid-19 hit the country. The school's financial crisis had been building for years. Enrollment was dropping, costs were rising, and MacMurray's fifteen-and-a-half-million-dollar endowment fund was just too small to be of much help. MacMurray President Beverly Rodgers said the college initially had a survival plan they thought might work. The plan involved borrowing money.

Beverly Rodgers: And we found out on a Thursday, that was when COVID had gotten serious, and the banks tightened up money and we found out they were not going to finance it and on Friday we announced closure.

(Music)

MacMurray is hardly alone.

Scores of American colleges that were already struggling financially may be forced out of business by the Coronavirus pandemic and the economic recession. Covid-19 is accelerating trends that have been growing for years: more competition for fewer students means small, underfunded schools are at risk.

Some schools like MacMurray that have been on the brink, will go under.

This hour, we'll look at institutions trying to survive the pandemic and the challenges for students.

We'll look at the complexity of keeping students and faculty safe at a large commuter university in a virus hotspot.

We'll go to a rural community college where students struggled to make the switch to online classes- and some dropped out. And we'll visit an urban community college that gained students when the pandemic hit.

These are the kinds of places where most Americans go to college- public institutions close to home. And while Harvard can announce all classes will be online without fear of losing students, and Williams College can trim its tuition, most institutions don't have huge endowments to buffer them.

Students across the country are reconsidering their options. Should they take time off, stick closer to home, or find a cheaper school?

Audrey Dowling: I don't know if I want to be in a situation where I have to worry about flying home at a moment's notice if this continues to be an issue.

Devyn Barram: I feel like it's probably dangerous to take out like several loans right now.

Catherine Asiedu: They might continue college on Zoom, so like, is it really worth my time to leave and not really leave, but staying at home? It's like, it's all very confusing for me.

Luke Lauche: Education is so expensive that it's hard to justify having a lesser version of something when you're paying so much.

(Music)

But bringing students back to campus puts them at risk. And it puts their professors and their communities at risk. College towns have already seen outbreaks- and so have college sports teams that came back together to practice this summer.

How students and colleges deal with these crises will have long-lasting effects on higher education. When the pandemic is over, some colleges won't be the same. And some won't exist at all.

MacMurray College survived the Civil War, the Great Depression, World War II. But it could not survive Covid-19. The college was already foundering even before the pandemic hit. In the fall of 2019, Mason Hale was a senior

(music fading out)

Mason Hale: It was about November, I believe, they called a meeting and let us know that the financial pinch was happening and we- there was possibility of us closing at the end of the year. But even then, we didn't really think it was all possible. There's always been rumors about MacMurray closing, so we were always just like, I will be fine. They'll always come out ahead.

But this time MacMurray did not come out ahead. In spring of 2020, students got the word. Junior Brenna Rande was still living in her dorm over spring break because she was a resident assistant.

Brenna Rande: And I was actually just working on some homework in my room. And my boyfriend came in and said, 'Did you see the email?' And it just changed everything. I read the email then saw that we were closing and there were I think four of us RAs that were there, that kind of, we all came together. And we kind of sat just there in silence, like we didn't know how to react. We didn't know what to do.

(Music)

MacMurray College was founded as a women's school in 1846, in the central Illinois farm town of Jacksonville. It was one of many liberal arts colleges that spread across the northeast and

Midwest in the 19th century. Most were founded by religious denominations- in MacMurray's case, the Methodists. MacMurray went coed in the 1950s. It offered a traditional liberal arts curriculum: natural sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities. It also offered degrees in nursing and, more recently, criminal justice. While MacMurray had a loyal alumni base...it never built up a sizable endowment. At just 15 and a half million dollars, that fund was small for a place like MacMurray.

RJ Stewart headed MacMurray's School of Arts and Sciences. She taught there for 29 years.

RJ Stewart: MacMurray was originally a women's college and the narrative surrounding that was that the women that went to MacMurray got married and their husbands gave the money to their colleges!

People who study higher education finance have been warning for years that a shakeout was coming for small colleges and universities. Robert Zemsky, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, is co-author of a book called "The College Stress Test". It gauges which factors predict the financial future of undergraduate institutions.

Colleges are fundamentally in a fight for a dwindling number of students. There are a lot more people going to college than there were when places like MacMurray were founded - but they're not going to schools like MacMurray. Zemsky says to think of the available pool of potential college students as a river.

Robert Zemsky: The question is to whom does that river flow and away from whom does that river flow? And at the moment, the river is flowing towards big rich institutions, and away from small, under-resourced institutions in very predictable ways.

Here are the key indicators Zemsky and his colleagues look for: first, is the freshman class getting bigger or smaller. Second, how many students come back to a school their sophomore year – what's the retention rate? Third, how much net revenue does a school earn per student.

Zemsky: So, the institutions in trouble are those that are having smaller classes, that they are giving away more financial aid to get a smaller class. And then when they get the smaller class it dwindles through attrition.

Zemsky and his colleagues estimate that 10 percent of American colleges – about 200 or more institutions – are on the verge of going under. Another 30 percent they label as “struggling.” Among the contributing factors- a kind of financial aid arms race known as “tuition discounting.”

Zemsky: Every institution thinks, if we give away a little bit of money more students will come to us. So this has been going on for about 15 years. So what you have listed in the institution's catalog is a price almost nobody pays.

At a typical small college, the average student only pays 40 to 45 percent of the sticker price. Zemsky says it seemed like a great idea- at first.

Zemsky: Let's give everybody a scholarship, make them feel like we really want them. So it was a marketing ploy. Pure and simple. And when it was first tried, the first users did remarkably well.

(Music)

But only the well-heeled colleges could keep it up. At MacMurray, 100 percent of students got financial aid, and two-thirds also qualified for federal Pell grants. MacMurray was enrollment driven – enrollment dollars were almost everything -- and enrollment kept sliding. The school leaked money for years. It eliminated majors, it cut whole departments. Meanwhile, MacMurray tried to make a marketing virtue of its growing smallness.

MacMurray Student 1: Everybody who comes here is going to be a part of what we call the Mac Family. It's like a big family.

MacMurray Student 2: It's not just a saying around here, everybody is a family. They truly want the best for you here.

MacMurray Student 3: If you want to go to a school where you feel important and where you're going to get the skills that you need to better yourself for the career that you're looking for, you can come to Mac.

Now that they can't come to Mac anymore, students are figuring out what to do next. The school brokered transfer agreements with a number of similar small schools, including Illinois College across town. For many students, the transition has been relatively easy. But for Brenna Rande, who got the news in her dorm room, it's proving unusually difficult. She's majoring in deaf education, which trains students to become teachers at institutions serving deaf and hard-of-hearing people. Not many schools offer such a program. MacMurray worked out a transfer agreement with Eastern Kentucky University, which also has a deaf education degree. But Eastern Kentucky has different requirements for its program. Brenna Rande would have to add three semesters to the remaining two she already has to finish.

Rande: Eastern Kentucky told me I would not graduate for five semesters. And because of that, I had to research other schools because five semesters is a very long time for someone who is supposed to be almost done.

After looking at 10 other schools, Rande landed on the University of North Florida. But by that time campus housing was full. When we last spoke, she said she can't really afford an apartment. The whole experience has soured her a bit on MacMurray, which promoted itself as a big family.

Rande: I loved Mac, and it was my home. I had made it my home. But how the administration is handling this does not make it feel like we're a family, it makes it feel like they kind of just dropped us. So it just- my whole feeling of Mac right now is kind of mixed, because I loved that place for three years. And now everything with this, it's just clouding all of my good memories.

(Music)

850 miles away, another small liberal arts college is teetering on the brink of extinction. Wells College is a school of just 471 students in New York State's Finger Lakes region. It's a handsome place. Red brick buildings perched on the shores of a glittering blue Cayuga Lake. It was founded in 1868 as a women's college by the man who started Wells Fargo and American Express. It went coed in 2004. Like MacMurray, Wells was financially strapped even before the pandemic. This May, Wells announced that if students could not return to the campus in the fall because of covid-19, the college would have to shut down. The school couldn't get by on remote learning.

Jonathan Gibraltar: If we don't have room and board revenue, we won't have enough revenue to operate the campus next year.

That's Wells president Johnathan Gibraltar. When I first talked to him in May, he said the college would let students and faculty know by mid-summer whether there would be a college to come back to.

Wells faces the same dilemma as other residential schools- room and board fees are a substantial source of the college's revenue. Wells also depends on money earned from a study-abroad program it runs in Florence, Italy. Students from other colleges and universities pay to attend. But Italy was hit hard by Covid-19.

Gibraltar: So we're looking into the future and we're saying, you know, 12% of our operating budget from our alum is probably secure. Another 15% of our operating budget is from the Florence program, and that's not secure. We don't know if Florence is going to reopen next year at all. And even if they do, we don't know whether families are going to feel any degree of confidence in sending their young, their students to Florence. And so, the only thing that's left in our operating budget are students through their tuition, room and board.

(Bells ringing)

Like all colleges, Wells has a lot of traditions. In this online video students ring the bells in the college's main building to call the campus to dinner. The place is small enough that everyone can hear them chime. Wells has 61 full and part time faculty- that's about 8 students per teacher.

Daniel Rosenberg: I always wanted to be at somewhere, like Wells because Wells is a deeply intimate education. It's a teaching institution first.

Professor Dan Rosenberg is one of three faculty members in the English Department.

Rosenberg: And I get to mentor students at this school in a way that I don't think you get at even most other liberal arts colleges. None of them have this opportunity where you can work with the same student in six different courses over, over the period of their you know career at Wells, or more.

Student Feleesha Jones will be a sophomore this year if Wells stays open. She says the tiny size of the college might be an advantage in battling covid-19.

Feleesha Jones: The good thing about having small class sizes is you're in a room with six people or 10 people, you can be six feet apart no matter what.

And Jones is keen to get back to the classroom again. Back to the swim team. Back to her friends.

Jones: I mean I have a few friends that have already started looking into other colleges, a few that already got accepted. But for the most part my class has stuck to the ground and said, we're going to ride it, ride this out through Wells, no matter what happens.

(Music)

Riding through Covid on a small college campus- with dorms and dining halls and classrooms and bathrooms- would involve a dizzying set of logistics. And it would be expensive for the school.

Gibraltar: Our reopening plan would include having all students tested by their primary care physicians before they return to campus.

Here's Wells President Jonathan Gibraltar again.

Gibraltar: And then they'd have to be tested once they arrive. And anytime they leave campus, student teaching, internships heading home on weekends, so it's going to be this process of continually having to test people. So we've said that we need on the low end 50,000 test kits to make it through next year. That we would need about 75,000 masks, about 60,000 pairs of gloves, that we need the capacity to social distance in our classrooms. We already have purchased a large-scale disinfecting machine, so that after any class we can go in and disinfect all hard surfaces very quickly.

And then there's the food service...no more taco bar in the grand old dining hall. At least for the time being, it's boxed meals to go. And can you really keep college students from partying? On this count, Gibraltar says being small is a big advantage.

Gibraltar: You know because Wells is small, because we're in a very isolated community, because we're in a community of people that care for each other and about each other, and we have an honor code that all of our students sign off on and agree to, we think the chance of being able to support and protect people is greater than it would be in a large metropolitan area at a much larger university. But we still recognize there's inherent risk in anything that we do right now.

But amidst all the uncertainty, the business of recruiting new students to Wells continues.

Kevin Spaeth: Hello everybody that's joining us for a virtual tour. My name is Kevin Spaeth and I'm currently a junior here at Wells.

Even though the campus is closed, Kevin Spaeth still has his job with the admissions office. He gives virtual online tours of the college from his home in New Jersey.

Spaeth: So this is MacMillen Circle which is where we do graduation and we do our convocation to start the year....

Of course, the advantage of guiding a virtual campus tour is you don't have to do it walking backwards.

Spaeth: Mostly what I've been doing is reaching out to students, high school students, just trying to give them my experience of Wells and why I think Wells can be such a good fit for so many, and to still kind of shed a light that, that no one really has thrown in the towel that all hands are still on deck and I still think that it's an awesome school for a lot of people.

One attractive thing about Wells is that it's cut its sticker price by 25 percent. President Jonathan Gibraltar.

Gibraltar: This past year we reduced our tuition by \$10,000, because I also believe very strongly that the cost of higher education was kind of escalating out of control. And what I always fear is that education then becomes kind of a class-based system. You know, it's really important for all of us to make high quality education available to all people.

However sincerely meant, the price cut was also strategic. It's called a tuition reset. Higher education expert Robert Zemsky reminds us that the average private college student only pays 40

to 45 percent of actual cost. Zemsky says more and more financially challenged colleges and universities are trying the tuition reset.

Zemsky: Well, we'll get honest, we'll tell you what our real price is, and you'll get less financial aid because you'll need less financial aid, if we showed you what the real price is. And that's been successful for some institutions.

Rosenberg: The first things I want to say is I was really pleased and impressed with the range of responses you all gave to this week's assignment...

Another strategy Wells is trying- free, online summer classes to keep current students engaged and to help them earn credits.

Rosenberg: And I thought the lobster dinner activity in particular led to some really wild inventions and some really moving and impressive scenes....

English Professor Dan Rosenberg has been teaching Intro to Fiction Writing to a handful of Wells students online. His wife also teaches in the English department, and they have a small child. The job market for English professors was already tough before Covid-19 and the recession. So for Rosenberg, a lot hangs in the balance.

Rosenberg: I was just granted tenure this year. And tenure doesn't mean quite as much as it used to when the institution to which you are tenured, has a more precarious future than you know, than you would like. Our entire entire income is dependent on Wells... it's terrifying.

(Music)

In early July, the Board of Trustees at Wells College voted to remain open and to welcome students back to campus this fall.

In a statement on its website, the college said it's not out of the woods yet, but better than anticipated enrollment, generous donations and a bridge loan gave it the confidence to move forward in the new school year.

You're listening to Covid on Campus, a documentary from APM Reports. I'm Stephen Smith.

We'll take a short break and then visit rural Arizona, where the virus has hit hard and students are struggling to complete their degrees - without in-person classes and without broadband.

Mark Vest: I have a mountain directly behind my house. And I've got a little square -- my cell phone square --that I can talk in, where the call won't drop.

You can hear all of our most recent education documentaries on our website and you can sign up for the Educate podcast. That's all at apmreports.org.

Support for APM reports comes from Lumina Foundation and the Spencer Foundation.

More in a moment. This is APM, American Public Media.

(Music)

Part 2 Intro

Stephen Smith: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary, Covid on Campus. I'm Stephen Smith.

Almost half of American college students go to community colleges. Some of those colleges are already seeing a bump in enrollment in this time of uncertainty as students seek an option that's close to home and a better bargain if classes are going to be online anyway. But many of the students community colleges serve are the people who are least able to withstand the economic turmoil caused by the pandemic. Some of those students are pausing their college careers. And administrators know those who take time off are far less likely to finish.

For students whose educations were already precarious, the pandemic and its economic fallout may derail them -- permanently. So every barrier in their way is perilous. For some students, a huge barrier right now is that they're on the wrong side of the country's digital divide. In northeastern Arizona, the virus hit early. And when campuses closed, some students couldn't just log on from home. Correspondent Sasha Aslanian has our story.

PART 2

Sasha Aslanian: The Navajo Nation is a sparsely populated place, with red buttes rising from a tan desert floor. Jessica Austin lives there in a town called Kayenta - population 5,000.

Jessica Austin: The town I live in is just one grocery store, three gas stations, McDonald's, Taco Bell, Burger King, and that's it. And the school district. That's all we have in the town.

Jessica's 32, and a member of the Navajo Nation. She and her husband have three kids. Before the pandemic, she worked at the local elementary school. That's what made her want to go to college.

Austin: I started working in food service at the elementary school. And I think that's where I kind of found out that I liked working with kids. And that's when I started going to school for early childhood education.

Jessica's been taking classes since 2017 at a community college called Northland Pioneer College. Northland Pioneer has four campuses, but all of them are hours away from where Jessica lives. The college also offers satellite classrooms that serve students in more remote areas. Jessica goes to one of these, called the Kayenta Center. It's two tan modular homes stuck together. In normal times, she and a few other other students gather in a room with a screen, and her professors beam in from other locations. But when the pandemic hit, everything closed. Jessica lost her classroom, and access to the computer where she did her homework.

Austin: The first thing that I was worrying about was the internet access and having to access all the materials I needed at home from home, and then also worrying about my kids doing their classes and getting their learning materials from school.

Jessica's kids are 8, 13 and 16. Jessica and her husband both worked in the school cafeteria. When school closed due to the pandemic, both of them lost their jobs.

(Music)

Jessica has another job- at a bakery, in the grocery store in town. She sent me photos of people waiting to get into the store. They're standing six feet apart in a line down the block. The lack of stores here means people are crowded trying to shop. The next closest grocery store is 150 miles away. She also sent photos of roadside signs telling people to shelter in place and wear masks. The virus spiked here. In late May, the infection rate was higher than in New York.

People in the Navajo Nation often live in multigenerational households. To try to keep more people safe, Navajo health officials imposed a curfew. That meant Jessica only had a tiny sliver of time after work at the bakery to drive to the Kayenta Center to use the good Wi-Fi to do her homework. The building was closed, but she could at least sit in the parking lot - until the curfew.

Austin: There's so many restrictions in place that we can't really go anywhere and get back in time before the curfew starts.

Jessica was kind of stuck.

The difficulties students like Jessica face in rural areas without good access to the internet have long been on the mind of Mark Vest, the president of Northland Pioneer College.

Mark Vest: One of the major education trade publications a couple of years ago, published an article that identified digital education deserts in America. And when you look on the map, we're right in the middle of one of those deserts.

Northland Pioneer serves students in Arizona's two poorest counties and 45 percent of its students are Native American.

When the college went remote, even Vest's staff members struggled to connect.

Vest: And I'm one of the lucky people because I do have broadband and I'm talking to it talking to you via broadband right now. If you and I were doing this conversation by cell phone, I would be standing in my backyard in about a five-foot square area because I have a mountain directly behind my house. And I've got a little square, my cell phone square that I can talk in where the call won't drop.

Vest grew up in rural Kentucky. When he came to Northland Pioneer 20 years ago to work in student advising, he had some big ideas for how to serve students in an area that's as big as West Virginia.

Vest: And one of the first things I said to my supervisor when I got here was 'Why don't you guys just do online instruction? It would solve everything.' And he just laughed and said, 'get in the car, we're going to take a drive.' And two hours later, we were crossing a cattle guard onto the Navajo Nation. And he said, 'look around and tell me why we're not doing online instruction. You know, let me tell you the percentage of the houses without running water. Let me tell you the percentage of the houses without reliable electricity,

much less without reliable broadband. Let's solve people's basic survival needs first, then we'll come back and talk about online instruction.'

Two decades later, more than a third of people living on the Navajo Nation still lack running water. And - as in a lot of rural areas - most people lack good access to broadband. That means they can't choose to take online classes someplace like University of Phoenix or Arizona State.

Vest: Even in an era of widely available online education, for many of our students, and what our students need to find jobs locally, we are their only chance. And so if we're not successful in serving them, they won't be successful. Because they don't have another college right down the road or across the street that they can run to to be successful.

Northland Pioneer has to maintain its own "microwave relay tower network" so it can deliver video to remote places.

Vest: We have broadband initiatives going on right now on the Navajo Nation. We have rural broadband initiatives underway in our area. And those are good. But they're not finished.

So when the pandemic hit, Vest says it wasn't just a matter of everyone logging on at home.

Students had to resort to other ways to do their work. An English professor told me about students writing out their papers by hand, taking pictures of them with their phones, and submitting them by text message.

During Northland Pioneer's spring break in late March, staff got in touch with students to figure out what they needed to continue.

Betsy Wilson raises scholarship money for the college and she's the go-to person to solve all kinds of practical problems.

Betsy Wilson: If a student has a car break down or even needs a tire, you know, that can be the difference between whether or not they can finish the semester. I've literally had nursing students that were in the last semester of their program were driving 1000 miles a week to get to classes, and it's not an it's not unusual.

As the pandemic began to ramp up, Wilson knew students would be losing their jobs as the economy slowed and she wanted to be ready to patch as many personal emergencies as she could.

Wilson: And then I started hearing so-and-so doesn't have a laptop. Can you do something about that? So, I got on Amazon and started trying to buy them! And already this early in the pandemic, there were so many people suddenly finding themselves not just schooling from home but working from home. And so I was scrambling to even purchase devices.

Wilson got the order in, but she wondered how she'd deliver them to students scattered hours away by car.

A colleague reached out to David Clouse, the Navajo County Sheriff.

David Clouse: They just had kind of called, hey, by chance, are you guys going that direction? And I'm like, actually we are. And so we kind of said, you know, we'll fly these things up there. And we started making more supply, weekly supply runs, because more and more people were not as apt to be traveling - especially Kayenta was kind of the hot zone of Arizona where there's a lot of positive cases. So we just said, yeah, let's just start lumping all this together and make some, some runs.

Chantal Kescoli: "I was like 'wait what? They're flying here?!'"

Chantal Kescoli is an academic advisor and library technician at the Kayenta Center where the student we met earlier, Jessica Austin, takes her classes. Kescoli met the little plane as it landed:

Kescoli: And I just saw the big old box the sheriff was carrying out.

Kescoli took that big old box of Chromebooks and hotspots and spent the next week delivering them to her students. She felt relieved.

Kescoli: They're already dealing with a lot. Honestly, I feel like they're already in an environment where it's already hard to learn through a system that just basically broadcasted, there's no face to face instruction and I already feel like that's a barrier. So for this, for this to happen, I'm just like, oh my gosh, like, how are they going to pull through? I know a lot of them are going to want to withdraw. But then as everything started to like slowly come together, I'm like, okay, this is possible.

Kescoli delivered one of the laptops to Jessica Austin. Jessica didn't get a hotspot, and her satellite internet has limited data and slows down. Her kids use the computer too, to do their homework.

Austin: We actually have to share. In the morning when we first get up, me and my son, we do his classwork. I work on his class with him, his assignments and then my youngest daughter, she has Zoom meetings around noon with her teacher and she uses the laptop, and then my oldest daughter that's in high school, she uses that laptop after her. And then towards the evening maybe eight, nine, 10 o'clock is when I get to do my work and that's when I start doing my online classes. And I'll usually be sitting here 11 12 o'clock still working on my classwork.

Jessica was able to finish her spring semester classes and enroll for summer. But some of her classmates had to drop out.

Vest: We lost some students.

Northland Pioneer President Mark Vest says enrollment is down 11 percent.

Students had to take time off to care for family members and people lost their jobs.

Vest says Northland Pioneer wanted to do everything it could to encourage students to come back. It cut its tuition in half through spring of 2021. The college also has the power to set the rate for the property taxes it receives - and it cut that rate to let taxpayers keep more.

Vest: We've been able to build up a little bit of a rainy day fund as an operational reserve. And as I told our board, and our board agreed, it is pouring outside right now metaphorically for everybody in our communities.

Vest says the rainy day fund buys them a little time to get through the pandemic. But by Christmas, they'll have to decide what the future looks like.

Aslanian: Do you worry about the survival of the institution?

Vest: At the moment? No, in the long term, of course I do. I'd be foolish not to, because I worry about the survival of higher education in America in its current format. And I worry about it because the way that we feel like we have to deliver education to our students based on their current digital availability, for example, is very expensive. You know, it is not the way I would do things if I were operating this college as a for-profit.

When we last spoke in July, President Mark Vest didn't know if enrollment was still down at Northland Pioneer College. They'd pushed registration back by a month. They'd found four funding streams to provide more laptops and hotspots.

But Vest is worried about the shift to online education, especially for first-generation students. He says they often need direct contact and support from faculty members.

Jessica Austin says there's actually been one advantage to taking all her classes online- she won't have to make the four-hour round-trip drive to complete her lab science requirements. She can do them on her laptop.

She's still on track to graduate in December.

Austin: And I was thinking maybe I'll finish my associates degree and my oldest daughter, she'll be a junior next year. And I said, maybe it'll give me time to save and get my life in order and then I'll be able to actually follow her somewhere and we'll both go to college and go for our degrees is what I'm thinking.

(Music)

Jessica's considering moving her family to Flagstaff so she and her daughter can attend Northern Arizona University. She can get her teaching degree there - and there's plenty of internet.

Northland Pioneer College's enrollment dropped - but that's not true at every community college.

Community colleges often see their enrollment climb during an economic downturn, as students try to improve their qualifications in a tough job market, and workers come back to retrain.

One of the biggest community colleges in the country is Northern Virginia Community College. NOVA has six campuses near Washington DC.

Anne Kress is the president. She's seen a bump in enrollment during the pandemic.

Anne Kress: We're up about 17% for summer.

All of NOVA's classes went remote in the pandemic, and most of them will stay that way this fall. Kress says the increased enrollment came from two kinds of students. The first group were existing students who hunkered down and took more credits than usual.

Kress: Typically, summer is a time even when you're going to college that you're thinking, well, I'll go part time and I'll enjoy this summer but this summer, you know, there's not a lot that folks can do. So they have really stuck with their college educations.

The second group is students who were going to pricier schools, and were looking for a bargain.

Kress: The majority of them are from in-state institutions. So, they might have been at Virginia Tech, they might have been at William and Mary, they're here for the summer back home, and they could be back home for a period of time. And so they're taking additional courses at NOVA because we're all part of the same public system in Virginia and so those courses transfer easily

The cost-savings also appeals to parents. Anne Kress did Zoom calls with parents of local high school seniors this spring.

Kress: So they were very interested in the affordability of NOVA and the quality of our classes, and the ability of our students to transfer to some of Virginia's most selective institutions.

Kress says a lot of families' financial situations have changed because of the pandemic. She's seeing more students choose recession-proof careers. NOVA's nursing applications were up by 30 percent.

But a lot of NOVA's students were already worried about cost. Before the pandemic, half of NOVA's students lacked food, housing or transportation. And even though there's broadband, and students may have laptops - not everyone can get online.

Kress: So we're in Northern Virginia, right, a very populous area, you know, it's the future home of Amazon HQ2 so we're pretty high tech here. What has been surprising to me through the pandemic, though, is not so much that the broadband isn't there, but that for many of our students, it's unaffordable. And I think that has been the challenge that we've seen. Again, we've turned our parking lots into free Wi-Fi hotspots, because students might have a laptop, but they can't afford the internet access to use it.

Students' tight finances have led the college to lower fees and add a new monthly payment plan. And Kress is concerned that lower tax revenues may lead the state to reduce support for the school.

So the boom in enrollment may not mean boom times at NOVA.

(Music)

Stephen Smith: That was correspondent Sasha Aslanian.

Northern Virginia Community College plans to keep nearly all of its classes online this fall. Some other colleges are doing the same. But most colleges still plan to offer face-to-face classes, at least for a portion of their students. Some of that is a game of chicken. Colleges don't want to announce they're going online and then have their students transfer elsewhere. The Chronicle of Higher Education has been tracking more than a thousand colleges' plans. In early July, nearly 60 percent said they expected to welcome students back on campus this fall - but that number has been ticking downward.

Florida made its decision in early June. Governor Ron DeSantis said the state's 12 universities would reopen:

Ron DeSantis: I think having our universities operating again is very, very important and so we want to stress that we have confidence in their ability to come up with good plans and to be able to move forward.

Florida's the second-largest state university system in the country. The largest is the California State University system - and it plans to stay almost entirely online. But in Florida, the plan is for all of its campuses to be offering face-to-face classes - even though DeSantis himself has pointed to young people as the source of recent spikes in the state's Covid cases.

Sasha Aslanian looks at efforts to reopen in a virus hotspot.

Newscaster 1: The main campus is a lonely place now but that will change on August 24th when the fall semester begins!

Newscaster 2: FIU is reopening its four campuses in August but with a ton of safety precautions to defend against the coronavirus.

Sasha Aslanian: Florida International University is a large research university in Miami. It has nearly 58,000 students and 10,000 faculty and staff. The university opened in 1972 on the site of an abandoned airfield. The air traffic control tower still stands at the center of campus as FIU's ivory tower. The campus is lush with palm trees, and Miami-style glass buildings. Cuban coffee is a popular afternoon drink. 60 percent of FIU students are Hispanic.

This summer, getting FIU's campus back open has been a huge part of this guy's job.

Ken Furton: My name is Ken Furton. I'm the Provost and Executive Vice President of Florida International University.

FIU's mainly a commuter campus, with lots of people coming and going every day- and Miami has been a hotspot in the pandemic. So reopening is going to be tough.

Furton: We knew that it would be a pretty monumental task.

One of the new safety measures for reopening is illustrated in Furton's Zoom background as he does interviews with people like me. It's a picture of an FIU classroom newly overhauled with student desks pulled far apart in a new socially distant seating pattern.

Furton: We've done that in every one of our rooms and we have over 200 classrooms.

To make that work there'll be a lot fewer people on campus this fall. FIU typically has about a third of its enrollment in online classes. This fall, it's likely two thirds of the students will stay remote.

For the third of students who opt to come to campus, they'll find six-foot distances between desks, everyone wearing masks, and sanitizing wipes for students and professors to wipe down their work surfaces at the beginning and end of every class period.

And, there's a mandatory screening app-

Furton: - That they have to complete on their phone before they come on campus every single day. And I have to do that, the students have to do that, the faculty have to do that or else, um, they're not welcome on campus.

The app asks about symptoms and if people have been within six feet of someone not wearing a face mask.

People flagged to be at high risk, or those who refuse to use the app will need to study or work remotely.

Furton says the daily real-time data will help FIU identify possible virus hotspots on campus.

Furton: So if some areas, we're seeing a large number of people who are showing some symptoms are being asked to quarantine, or if we find out the entire campus is potentially

at a rate higher than the general community, then our plan will allow us to go into, or back into, a remote mode or into a reduced capacity mode.

There's testing, housing set aside for people who need to quarantine and contact tracing at the ready.

I wanted to hear student opinion on the plan to return to campus, so I got in touch with the editor-in-chief of FIU's student newspaper. Gerard Albert III took the call on his porch. A storm was approaching.

(Thunder)

Gerard Albert III: I'm sorry, do you hear the thunder, is it picking up?

Aslanian: It's really storming down there!

He says he hangs out outside a lot, trying to keep some distance from the elders in his household because he's worried about the virus. Gerard graduated in May, so he wasn't supposed to be the editor anymore, but the new editor got stuck in Spain due to the pandemic so he's still pitching in, covering the plan to reopen.

Albert: You know, FIU faces a weird predicament because we're in pretty much the epicenter of the state for the outbreak.

And Gerard wonders how that'll figure into students' plans to go back.

Albert: It's kind of the FIU identity, we're a heavy commuter school, and people going back and forth. Something special about Miami is the multi-generational households. So, you know, even I, I live with my great grandmother at my parents' house, and then I live with my grandmother at I guess my permanent house- I kind of switch between the two houses. And that's just a Hispanic culture thing, Latino culture thing is that you don't only

live with your mom and dad or very, very rarely by yourself, especially in Miami with the rent. But you know, you live with abuela and abuelito and your whole family's in there. So I could see some people not wanting to come back just for fear of spreading into their families.

Even though Gerard has his degree, he'd intended to go back to FIU to take some photography courses. The pandemic had prevented him from getting to work in a darkroom. But he's not excited about going into a tiny room and touching equipment a lot of other people have to touch, so he thinks he'll probably wait a semester to see how things play out.

Gerard says student opinion on reopening seems to be split, and he sees that even among the staff on the student newspaper. His opinion editor is Ursula Muñoz Schaefer. She's run a lot of dueling columns about whether FIU should reopen.

Ursula's editing these pieces remotely. She's been home in Puerto Rico since campus closed in March.

Ursula Muñoz Schaefer: Yeah, my stuff is like still in my dorm.

Ursula says it's been easy to recruit students to write columns both for and against reopening. People have such strong feelings about both. Ursula is concerned about the infection rate in Miami herself, but she's studying television production and she wants to be back on campus to take hands-on classes.

Muñoz Schaefer: I was set to graduate at the end of the summer. And I was going to take summer classes, one of those is my capstone. That's this really important class where you kind of put together everything you've learned in the four years you've been in college. And in my case, that means working on a studio and everything. And I wasn't going to take that class over Zoom.

Ursula wonders how such a densely populated campus will achieve all the social distancing required, but she expects university officials will have a proper plan to move forward.

She's had to roll with big uncertainties before.

Muñoz Schaefer: The reason I go to FIU was because of the hurricane.

Hurricane Maria struck her sophomore year when she was studying at another college in Puerto Rico. FIU offered students like Ursula in-state tuition if they transferred.

Muñoz Schaefer: I guess you could say like, my college career started with a disaster and it's ending with one too.

(Music)

Another person who's eager to return to Florida International University's campus is Martha Meyer.

Martha Meyer: I have favorite spots that when I walk across campus, we have a bridge that overlooks two different ponds that connect. And we have these turtles that gather, and they know, they know when kids are going to walk across the bridge, and they get fed regularly, they're fat turtles now.

Meyer got all three of her degrees at FIU: her bachelors, masters & PhD. And now she's a senior instructor in Education Policy Studies, training future teachers. She's requested to be back in the classroom.

Meyer: I would love to be one of the people who stands in front of my students and has that interaction because I feed off of that energy and that learning. That's how I am. But this is not the time for me to be worrying about how I feel, this is a time to be worrying about how multiple people feel.

The people she's referring to are all those she represents as president of the faculty union at FIU. So she's been dealing with the question of professors returning to campus. Who gets assigned to teach courses in-person, or online, or a hybrid? This has been a flashpoint for professors and instructors around the country who don't want to be forced to show up in a classroom. But Meyer says at FIU, faculty can choose, and if they get an assignment that makes them uncomfortable, they can file a grievance and there's a process to get them reassigned.

Meyer: Our argument has been faculty should not be compelled to return to campus if they have a health concern. Period, end of story. We have been lucky our administration has been fully supportive of that.

So far, Provost Ken Furton says the proportion of faculty and students who want to come back is about the same. He calls it an enormous jigsaw puzzle figuring out the right balance, and it's likely to change based on the pandemic.

Furton says the coronavirus has already cost the university 30-million dollars in extra costs and lost revenue from things like cancelled events, lost sales from campus stores, and lost income from housing.

And it has fewer students from overseas. This is a big problem for many universities that depend on tuition money from international students -- students who now can't come or won't come.

But there are some bright spots. Furton says they've had the highest summer enrollment in their history.

Furton: We've obviously seen a drop in international students and some out of state students, but we've seen an increase in the number of students who are local that maybe were going to leave and stayed close. And also, we've seen an increase in the number of credit hours that those students are taking.

He's hopeful FIU can hang onto these students whether it's online or in-person this fall.

And Furton has one more bit of science to deploy against the Coronavirus.

(Dogs Barking)

Dogs.

Furton: We were asked to take a look at training dogs for detection of COVID-19.

Furton's a chemist as well as being provost, and he's an expert on odor detection. For 20 years his lab has worked with dogs to detect drugs, or explosives, even diseases. They can tell when a person is about to have a seizure better than any machine can.

Furton says they're training Covid-19 detection dogs for a small pilot study.

Furton: We're fairly certain that the dogs can be trained to the odor of the COVID-19 itself. So, if somebody, you know, contaminates an area, say if somebody tests positive, and you want to, you know, search a room or search areas where that person has been the dogs could be useful for that.

With an enormous project at stake, safely reopening a commuter campus during a pandemic, FIU needs every advantage it can find to beat the virus.

Furton: When it seems a little bit hopeless, you know, there's a lot of hopeful things that are going on.

(Music)

Stephen Smith: That report was from correspondent Sasha Aslanian. I'm Stephen Smith.

In the short run, the coronavirus pandemic is causing tremendous pain for students and institutions. It's accelerating trends like the disappearance of small liberal arts colleges- and among the colleges that remain, the disappearance of liberal arts majors, students seek more practical degrees. And it's throwing a harsh spotlight on the divide between haves and have-nots.

In the long run, it's possible that the current crisis could help to push reforms that advocates say are badly needed – like more reasonable tuition, better online classes, and a smoother process for transferring credits between institutions. More colleges are now accepting students without standardized tests such as the SAT – a test some people argue unfairly benefits privileged students.

It's not clear how many of these changes will be permanent, but some will be. So this may be a pivotal moment for colleges and universities. The higher education landscape that emerges post-pandemic will likely look very different than it did before.

(Theme Music)

You've been listening to Covid on Campus, from APM Reports. It was produced by Sasha Aslanian with me, Stephen Smith, and Sabby Robinson. The editor is Catherine Winter. The web producer is Andy Kruse. Mixing by Craig Thorson. Music help from Liz Lyon. Fact checker Betsy Towner-Levine. The APM Reports team includes Emily Hanford, Chris Julin and Alex Baumhardt. The editor in chief of APM Reports is Chris Worthington.

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