Safety vs. Security: Returning F2F During a Global Pandemic

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In March of 2020, most educators across the nation received the same curt email: "Classes will be online until further notice. You have one week to prepare. Good luck." Given that there were only a few weeks left in the semester, most of us hobbled through with notes, Zoom, and Panopto recordings. But then the big test came—would faculty, staff, and frontline workers return for the Fall 2020 semester?

This left many administrations in a conundrum. Going online, naturally, would be the safest and most ethical choice, given the unknown nature of COVID-19 at the time. However, doing so would also create a new set of headaches. For one, as of March 2020, populations in agricultural areas and/or with poor internet services would suffer:

> . . . most rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged students are least likely to have broadband Internet access at home. Only 47% of students who live in rural areas have high-speed Internet access at home compared to 77% of those in suburban areas. Of those who do not have home access, 36% live in a home with no computer and 58% live on a farm or other rural setting. (Bauer et al. 2)

Therefore, going fully remote would simply not work in some geographical areas.

Secondly, if going online was a viable option, smaller colleges faced the potential financial windfall of students simply not coming back and/or taking a gap year due to uncertainty. MacMurray College, a liberal-

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arts school with around 500 students in Illinois, "survived the Civil War, the Great Depression and two world wars. But it could not survive COVID-19" (Aslanian 1). Like many schools that were already floundering, the emerging pandemic scared banks away. Loans became tighter, enrollment dropped significantly, and endowments were not generous enough to recoup the losses.

Robert Zemksy, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, said this pandemic was the final nail in the coffin for many under-resourced institutions. In fact, "Zemsky and his colleagues estimate that 20% of America's private liberal-arts colleges—about 200 or more institutions—are on the verge of going under" (Aslanian 3).

To combat these issues, numerous colleges and universities opted to return face-to-face before any vaccine was rolled out. While safety protocols were set in place (face shields, mandatory masks, and sanitization stations in every classroom), students had the option of coming and going as they pleased. No attendance was taken, and while they were strongly encouraged to attend live via Zoom, many simply watched the videos at their own leisure.

While this decision—"flexible learning options" as many administrations called it—kept some colleges and universities financially afloat, what effect did it have on our most vulnerable populations? Was it morally sound, or will we look back on these decisions with horror in years to come? This article will discuss how returning F2F or to the classroom during COVID-19 shed a regrettable light on the haves (tenured professors) and have-nots (adjuncts, older faculty members, and frontline workers) on campuses across the country.

Adjuncts

The bleak job market, especially in humanities, wasn't always the norm in academia. At one time, being a college professor was considered a pretty good job. *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* states that more than half of the faculty in public intuitions were unionized in the 1960s (Bousquet 187). Furthermore, in the 1960s-1970s, part-time faculty made up 20% of the population. They were used as more of a stopgap measure, i.e., if a full-time faculty member took a sabbatical and/or an emergency hire was needed. The rest, 80%, were either tenured or tenure-track (201). And then the 1980s rolled in with a vengeance.

In the era of Reaganism and trickledown economics, buzzwords like "flexibility" and "supply vs. demand" and "alternative perspective" began to swirl around college campuses (Bousquet 198-199). Couple that with anti-union rhetoric from politicians, and things started to decline rapidly. Higher education became a business model, one to make money and cut all humane corners. What was one easy way to accomplish this? Deny all the bells and whistles that come with full-time employment. In

1987, part-time faculty rose to 40% of the academic population in higher education (Bousquet 201).

Currently, 75.5% of college faculty are contingent, meaning no access to tenure-track positions. Of that percentage, 50% are adjunct (part-time). This means dismal pay, no retirement contributions, and no access to health care benefits. According to New Faculty Majority, that represents 1.3 out of 1.8 million faculty members ("Facts about Adjuncts" 1) . And let's not forget: no office space, no voting rights in departmental matters, or campus orientation. Those outside the ivory walls may find it hard to believe that one can obtain a Ph.D. and make more money as a manager at Burger King.

When COVID-19 hit, life for part-time faculty in every field went from bad to worse very quickly. Layoffs began almost immediately. Jax Kinniburgh, a composition professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, was given very little notice or warning. "'They gave the boot to a third of their teaching staff,' says Jax, meaning all of their adjuncts and contingent faculty, with an abrupt note saying they would not be able to hire them and thanking them for their service" (Schanzer 3) . Like many adjuncts, Jax was not a stranger to this situation. In fact, a year prior, she was homeless. She adds:

> 'I have no idea what I'm going to do now . . . I live paycheck to paycheck anyway.' The amount they'd been making, $22,000 a year, $18,000 after taxes 'even with working as a writing tutor' did not insulate them from the shocks of ordinary life, let alone a pandemic, and has not allowed them to develop any cushion. The University of Cincinnati, their remaining school, has promised them a summer course, 'but it won't be enough to cover rent at all.' (Schanzer 3-4)

Marty Baldwin, another composition professor at Jefferson College, said the pandemic had a strange, equalizing effect across the board. Adjuncts have always been poorly compensated, readily dismissed at any moment, and now others were just becoming aware of how detrimental that lifestyle is on one's mental health. Baldwin states, "It's strange. I've been in such a precarious financial position but now everybody is" (Schanzer 7-8).

For those so-called lucky enough to keep their jobs, they faced the fear of getting sick without being insured. Because most adjuncts teach introductory or survey courses, that means larger classes, mostly brimming full of freshman students. And while it's not meant to be demeaning in any way, many 18-year-olds did not take the virus as seriously as they should have (parties, and subsequent crackdowns, were reported off campus on the weekends across the nation).

In the article, "COVID Crisis Endangers Adjunct Professors," David Chatfield is profiled. He is 42. He is an art history adjunct professor at two community colleges in Aurora and Fort Lupton, Colorado. In

addition to doubling his workload during the COVID-19 pandemic (recording and uploading all his lectures), he had to deal with the pressure of returning to environments that would not protect him if he got sick. Making just $28,000 a year made it difficult to afford a plan on his own: "If I do get infected, what are my options? Do I cancel class? Do I get a sub? Do I get health insurance" (Rodriquez 2)?

Adding insult to injury, if contingent faculty members became ill on the job, very few received any sick leave benefits. Although Congress passed legislation "entitling workers to paid sick leave for reasons related to the virus," sizable organizations (500 or more employees) do not have to provide it, "which could affect adjunct faculty who work at larger colleges and universities" (Rodriquez 4).

> Meanwhile, a professor teaching a three-credit course at a public community college earned a per-class average of $2,263 in the 2019-20 academic year, according to a report by the American Association of University Professors. At a university, the amount shoots up to $4,620 per class. The result: These adjuncts often teach at multiple campuses in order to make ends meet. In the midst of this pandemic, moving among different locations adds to their risks and their potential to spread the virus. (Rodriquez 4)

The term "freeway flyer" is certainly very applicable here. Because adjuncts usually work at several schools to make ends meet, even in the best of times, being forced to travel back and forth only increased their risk of catching / spreading the virus.

Some could say adjuncts were placed in the perfect storm during all this: layoffs, no healthcare, larger class sizes, and commuting between campuses. Just the thought of being in enclosed spaces (classrooms, hallways, stairwells, and elevators) with students was panic inducing for many. Unlike tenured faculty, who if approved from human resources could teach from home, many adjuncts were given no choice. Return to the classroom, or do not come back at all. Given no wiggle room, many opted to leave the profession for good after 2020.

Older Faculty Members

A common gripe amongst some college students is their professor is just so "ancient." While it's true that some stay in academia for the love of their subject and students, the dark underside is many have to stay in the game in order to make ends meet. This, once again, highlights the uncomfortable divisions within faculty ranks, the haves and have-nots.

The haves are tenured professors who have the fiscal means to retire at an appropriate age. Say 65. The have-nots include everyone else. (Margaret Mary Vojtko, the adjunct highlighted in NPR and *Slate*, who died penniless after 25 years of service to Duquesne University, is a perfect example.) These individuals keep working well into their seventies and

even eighties. Statistically, this gap is not great for women or minorities either. According to the article "The Aging Faculty" in *Inside Higher Ed*:

> The median age of the U.S. labor force is 42 years, versus 49 for tenure-track professors, the report says. Similarly, compared to the general working population, significantly more faculty members are age 55 or older (23 percent in general versus 37 percent in academe). Consistent with other research, the brief says that women and minorities are underrepresented among professors, particularly those more senior. Women make up just 25 percent of tenure-track faculty members older than 55, for example, while racial minorities are just 16 percent. (Flaherty 1)

Because so many faculty members are off the tenure track, with dismal pay and no retirement nest egg, staying often becomes a matter of necessity. In fact, "a survey commissioned by Fidelity Investments and reported at *Inside Higher Ed* in June found that 'some 74 percent of professors aged 49-67 plan to delay retirement past age 65 or never retire at all'" ("Are College Professors Too Old?" 1). In the same study, 55% declared feeling "uncertainty over having enough money to retire comfortably" as their number one reason for staying in academia (2).

With age comes increased health risks and vulnerability, including cardiovascular disease, stroke, high blood pressure, cancer, diabetes, and so on. Even with all the safety protocols in place, without a COVID-19 vaccine readily available at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, these professors were put into a higher risk category. As a result, some older faculty members that were not granted the benefit of teaching remotely passed away.

Marjorie Valbrun, author of "A Requiem for Academics," states "It's always tragic when a professor dies unexpectedly. It can mean the loss of a valued faculty member, a respected colleague, or a favorite instructor or beloved mentor" (1). But even more than that, it is the years of experience, which includes counseling younger faculty members, working across the disciplines, and networking with different schools, all of which glue people and their institutions together. Their talents are not easily replaceable.

When Valbrun's article was published in *Inside Higher Ed* on April 15, 2020, she paid tribute to three of the pandemic's earliest academic victims who were adored by their students and peers:

- David C. Driskell, Distinguished University Professor, Emeritus, at the University of Maryland at College Park, passed away April 1. His colleagues said he was "recognized worldwide for his scholarship and expertise in African American art" but remained generous and kind. He was 88.

- Truby Bernard Clayton, chairperson of music education at Wiley College in Texas, where he taught for 42 years, also died April 1. Students described him as "a caring professor who challenged them beyond their limits." He was 75.
- George Gannage, an assistant teaching professor of marketing and assistant director of the Center for Professional Selling at Ball State University in Indiana, died April 6. He was a "consummate students' professor" and known for being charming, witty and a pretty great dresser. He was 63. (Valbrun 1-2)

And one professor that was not included on that list was Dr. Alan Rosiene, 60, an English professor and colleague of mine at Florida Tech. He passed away from complications of COVID-19. During his 28-year career with Florida Tech, he received multiple in-house teaching awards and the President's Award for University Excellence between 2013 and 2015 (Rogers 1).

Globally, it was the same story. At Aligarh Muslim University, located in India, as many as 17 working professors died of COVID-19 in the last 18 days. (This was reported in May of 2021.) Professor Aftab Alam, the former secretary of the Teachers Union, said, "This is a very bad phase for the university. This has never happened before when so many people associated with the university have died" (Ahmad 2). Many of these professors were older, with underlying conditions, such as hypertension and diabetes (Ahmad 1).

It has been said that so-called "older" professors love the profession so much that they cannot bear to leave their students. This is admirable and telling of their passions. But it could also be said that they were just adjuncts who were exploited by the system, stayed because they could not monetarily retire, and were not given options how do update their teaching pedagogies since 2020.

Frontline Workers

Lastly, there are the unsung heroes of COVID-19 on college campuses, the frontline workers. They include the custodians, plumbers, chefs, managers, carpenters, purchasing assistants, administrative assistants, HVAC/control mechanics, delivery drivers, maintenance folks, and so on. Without them, no campus would last more than a week. They serve everyone and are often unappreciated.

As campuses reopened during the pandemic, they were responsible for "coordinating quarantine housing and mask distribution and managing conduct hearings for students who break social distancing and other public health rules" (Anderson 1). Like adjuncts and older faculty members teaching primarily service courses, they had more physical interaction with students than tenure track professors and

administrators. However, most remained quiet about their own personal health and safety concerns. Why? Limited protection.

> Lacking the job security of tenured faculty members backed by influential unions and faculty senates and empowered by shared governance policies, student affairs staff tend to be young and in the early stages of their careers -- and have fewer job protections. Instead of speaking out, they're working to carry out and improve return-to-campus plans and retain their jobs amid widespread budget and program cuts, faculty layoffs, and staff reductions due to the financial havoc the pandemic has created for higher ed. (Anderson 2)

Unlike faculty members, who may have union backing, they were not under the same security umbrella. And in some states, such as those with right to work laws, it was not even option. In fact, frontline workers at colleges (food services workers, custodians, and housing staff) are usually the least protected group on campus.

While there were some instances of frontline workers unionizing and striking, it was extremely rare. The economic impact on colleges at the beginning of the pandemic was swift, which meant layoffs and furloughs. As a result, keeping silent was almost a requirement under such dire conditions: "job loss means losing health-care coverage during the pandemic, and for residence life staff members, it could also mean losing housing" (Anderson 4). Not surprisingly, and like adjuncts and older faculty members making the lowest wages, these workers became exhausted, and mental health issues skyrocketed across college campuses.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, 5,496,300 people have died from COVID-19 ("Coronavirus Death Toll" 1). When the pandemic hit college campuses in March of 2020, administrations faced tough choices. Going fully online would have been the most respectable choice, but that was not feasible in some remote areas of the nation. Likewise, if they did, they faced the possibility of students not returning. Many parents questioned the full price of tuition when lectures were delivered via Zoom and advocated for discounted tuition fees.

Regardless, the 2020-2021 academic year shed light on academia's haves and have-nots. Adjuncts, most lacking health care benefits, put themselves and others at risk by traveling back and forth between institutions. Older professors, some with preexisting health conditions, were forced to play Russian Roulette by returning face-to-face. And frontline workers showed up on a daily basis trying to provide normalcy for everyone when supplies were constantly running out and not arriving quickly enough. Our most vulnerable populations in academia

suffered greatly because of the pandemic, and its long-term effects on the field will be analyzed, debated, and scrutinized for years to come.

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