





PROTECTING OUR CAMPUSES IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

by David Vinson, PhD

Here's what we know, but perhaps as valuable, also what we feel:

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus has changed the world.

It is a global, historical event, and we are living it.



If the outbreak has taught us anything thus far, it's that none of us are impervious to the unthinkable. Not since the deadly influenza of 1918 has the nation—higher education included—experienced anything reminiscent of the top-down, all-encompassing impact of COVID-19.

For the majority of Americans, reality began to alter in March of this year. The effect was akin to a sucker-punch, and we were stunned, left to reel in the moment. But we've since managed to pick ourselves up, and over the past several weeks, we've demonstrated our resilience and adaptability.

I believe we have a responsibility to one another to reflect on what we've learned so far, but first I'd like to offer a few simple, practical suggestions for what we can do to better prepare for the next public health emergency.

Preparing for the Next Public Health Emergency: Simple Practices for a Safer Campus

There are several practical measures we can take to reduce the spread of illness on campus, whether in classrooms, dormitories, libraries, cafeterias, administrative offices, or in highly trafficked spaces like sporting arenas and recreation and wellness centers.

I don't wish to suggest that what follows is an exhaustive list. Far from it, in fact. I do hope, however, that my suggestions elicit ideas and encourage conversations about what we each can do to make our campuses safer, healthier spaces.

First, I like what Dr. Anthony Fauci, known immunologist and leading White House coronavirus task force member, has said about shaking

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hands. In a recent Wall Street Journal podcast, Fauci somewhat seriously advocated for “never [shaking] hands again.”

Don’t get me wrong, it is a custom I rather enjoy. But Fauci is wise to call attention to how a custom as ubiquitous as the handshake can be harmful, and immeasurably so during a contagion. A friend of mine who’s lived in South Korea for over a decade says he doesn’t even miss the handshake now that he’s grown accustomed to the courtesy of bowing. A simple wave or a “hello” would also suffice.

Second, we need sanitizing stations all over campus. I mean it, in every building and on every floor, and definitely in the most central, highly trafficked locations. I’d like sanitizing stations to become as common as hand soap in bathrooms.

Better yet, I’d like us to view sanitizing stations in the same manner we do when we’re at a public restroom that’s run out of hand soap: Befuddled and in disbelief, we tell someone, who then addresses the problem. We need a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to running out of hand sanitizer.

Third, disinfectants must be widely accessible on campus; and similarly, the practice of being equipped with disinfectants (for instance, disinfectant wipes that are carried in purses, backpacks, briefcases, and so on) must become normalized. Rather than be alarmed by a co-worker who wipes down a shared refrigerator handle, why not instead question when a co-worker fails to do this?

As an educator, I have taken for granted the cleanliness of spaces that I share with other educators. At the start of each class session, I undergo a routine, and during this routine I touch with regularity objects that are touched by others throughout the day: doorknobs, light switches, dry erase markers, dry erasers, the keyboard and mouse that operate the computer, the overhead switch to the projector, the podium, the blinds. I’m sure I’m forgetting half a dozen other examples.

The same logic applies to the desks that students share as they move from one classroom to another. Custodial workers are amazing, but it is pure fantasy to expect them to disinfect every desk on campus, and to do so on a daily basis.

And finally, we must prioritize what we do not even touch or see—that is, air cleaning systems designed to capture and inactivate pathogens that can make us sick.

Collective Efforts from the Finest Institutions

While there is obvious value in considering the simple, practical measures we can take to better prepare for the next public health emergency, we should also reflect on the many measures we’ve adopted in higher education since the outbreak—after all, these signal our efforts to rally in the interests of students, faculty, staff, and the community at large, and a time when we are searching for models of clear-eyed leadership.

During the month of March, as news of the outbreak’s reach grew starker by the day, private universities and colleges have responded with clarity, compassion, and resilience. Let’s take a moment to appreciate some of the major challenges we’re continuing to address.

We have endured a seismic shift from campus-based education to online education. This has necessitated cooperation and belief from everyone involved.

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Crediting IT Experts and Student Resilience

Students must be credited, as well. Their resilience makes our jobs all the more rewarding, and just imagine what it must be like for them—to be, say, 19 years old; to be enrolled in 18 credit hours while grappling with the realities of a global pandemic and adjusting to new learning modes, homework, essays, exams, and so on.

Moreover, we can only guess at what's going on in their lives. They are stressed, too, and we must extend to them our compassion and trust.

Most of all, we are so deeply indebted to the savvy and tireless devotion of our IT experts, who have made the transitions to online education and remote work possible in the first place.

With campuses on lockdown, we're now managing our work from home. This marks another seismic shift in our daily lives. Not all of our work duties seamlessly translate to remote

work, but we are finding solutions, often (again) with the guidance of our IT experts.

Helping Students in Financial Need

Not every student has the financial means to return home, particularly if he or she lives at a great distance from campus, whether in another state or across the country.

One of my favorite examples of how private institutions are rallying to care for its students is that of Davidson College, located in North Carolina. At Davidson, students in financial need were provided additional support by the Dean's Office, which offered free shuttle rides to airports and also refunded the remaining cost of room and board.

Moreover, in an instance that demonstrates the unifying spirit of the institution, Davidson alumni created a Google Doc listing the air miles they'd collected so that students in need could use them to purchase tickets home.

Solutions for International Students

We're finding solutions for international students, who need us now more than ever.

According to the Institute of International Education, almost 1 million of the nation's more than 19 million higher education students come from overseas. China is the largest contributor to America's international student body, with about 370,000 students currently enrolled. Of the other countries highly affected by COVID-19, South Korea is the third largest contributor, Japan is eighth, and Iran is thirteenth.

With borders closing around the world, and with dormitories on campuses vacated, many international students are stuck in limbo, unable to return home and also deeply concerned about where they'll live.

Private universities and colleges have made exemptions that allow international students to remain on campus. Not only this, but at the University of Southern California, summer housing will remain available for students unable to depart in May, as the academic year concludes. This is proving standard practice across the country.

Likewise, international students who remain on campus are continuing to receive essential accommodations, that of dining as well as student health and safety services.

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And finally, we're not underestimating the psychological impact of living amidst the coronavirus outbreak.

Students are uniquely vulnerable to stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and self-harm, and the public health emergency that we're all experiencing only exacerbates their vulnerabilities.

Telemental Health Services

Mental health services at private universities and colleges are swiftly responding to a radically different landscape to support students during this stressful and isolating period. In-person sessions are now discouraged, which has accelerated the need for virtual visits and other forms of telemental health. Adjustments are being made—and again, what would we do without our IT experts?

Some institutions that had implemented a telemental health platform in a limited capacity prior to the pandemic were equipped to more rapidly roll out online resources. For instance, Johns Hopkins University was able to provide its entire student body access to a secure online

cognitive behavioral therapy program within a single week. This should serve as a lesson going forward.

For all of the good work that institutions are doing to protect the psychological well-being of students, employees are likewise encouraged to seek treatment by way of telemental health.

In this regard, we're seeing across the country a much-needed development amongst employees at private universities and colleges—that is, the de-stigmatization of seeking mental health services.

Using Our Campuses to Fight COVID-19

Because our institutions serve communities beyond the parameters of campus, anything we can do to serve the nation during a crisis, we must try.

Several private institutions—those such as Tufts University, Middleburg College of Vermont, and New York University—are in the process of converting campus dormitories to temporary hospitals, and with the goal of providing beds for COVID-19 patients or for those displaced from existing hospitals.

MIT and Harvard, among many others, are donating personal protective equipment, including masks, gowns, and gloves to local hospitals and health care workers.

At academic health centers like those at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University, researchers are testing medications to learn more about how to treat COVID-19.

This is exactly what we need, both now and in the event of any future public health emergency—a collective effort, one that draws on faculty expertise and campus facilities, and with the mindset that we are all responsible for one another.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PUPN staff writer

Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, husband, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.

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