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The need for strong university leadership and proactive thinking in response to the Covid-19 pandemic

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We write on behalf of the Peace and Justice Studies Association (PJSA), a bi-national North American peace and justice association of both scholars and activists, on the need for strong university leadership and proactive thinking in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper lays out both principled and pragmatic advocacy for a robust bailout and stimulus for higher education. Our reasoning extends and promotes the message and vision of PJSA by ensuring equitable distribution of resources and by safeguarding opportunity for current and future generations of students across all variety of cultural, ethnic, geographic, and socio-economic categories.

Averting the Enrollment cum Expenditure “Crisis” Mentality in Higher Education

In crisis situations the hardwired human reaction is rapid response - this is mammalian - fight or flight. The Covid-19 pandemic is no exception. College and university campuses are an important site of the many metaphorical battlefields. On most campuses, students have been sent home to physically distance, and administrations on many campuses have invoked faculty, students, and staff to keep teaching, learning, and researching. This strategic approach is inconsistent with research on best practices for handling trauma in the workplace or classroom.¹ Most university responses have, thus far, been like a collective immune system; they have tried to produce the tried and true Protestant American antibody of work as the sole arbiter of normalcy. While some are experiencing pandemic productivity many are, unfortunately, struggling to get by. Institutional survival should not be based on achievement during adversity, but thoughtful strategic planning and forward-thinking reflexive leadership.

The Covid-19 fight on college campuses must be one for shared resources and the protection of the values of equity and inclusion. Higher education is responsible for the promotion of a civilization’s mental health and university spaces hold the brain trust of our civilization and democracy. Austerity will not develop antibodies, vaccines, or the minds and technologies of the future. Today’s pandemic showcases decades of budget cuts that do not reflect prioritizing the role of higher education in public health and, indeed, undercut the university role in the production of critical and life-sustaining public goods. Rather than once again averting our eyes, we need to look this crisis in the face and see it as an opportunity to address the unequal structures of the past and re-center the production of knowledge as a pro-social and affirmative good in society. Covid-19 did not create injustice, but it can be a “portal”² to sustainable change. Universities are the lever which can open this portal.

As the class of 2020 graduates face an expected job market with 20-30% unemployment we see further evidence that those who've contributed the least to the problem will suffer the most. Campuses need to expand student educational and training opportunities and counter this trend. The minds of the future are the most deserving of bailouts and deserving of the hard-won opportunities that a quality education should provide.

The importance of strategic and reflexive evidence-based leadership in times of crisis.

Academics are not accustomed to flight, but neither should academics accept the metaphor of fight. While we have tried to produce antibodies through ingenuity and focus on works, the need for art and play is rarely considered. Play is rarely the first American response to crisis and, of course, this is no vacation. Still, a month into this pandemic, calls are increasing to "get the economy working again" and "end the stay at home orders." This is a problem of the commons, and we believe that only critical thinking, proper management, strong science, and the flexibility grasped through art and play will mitigate the risks of returning to our past sense of "normal."

This is a time to rethink much of what was considered normal in the past. University policy decisions have manifold ramifications requiring creative and strategic leadership. College and university administrators were facing severe demographic shifts long before the Covid-19 coronavirus hit the United States.³ Forecasts of shrinking enrollment were a pre-Covid-19 foregone conclusion and many colleges and universities were already preparing for spending cuts as a result of shrinking college-age demographics and enrollments. In the changed world of Covid-19, we know the economic futures of many industries have rapidly been put in limbo. Some industries will not survive. Higher education will survive, but at what costs to students and knowledge seekers across the country?

Dire prognosis of the death of higher education is a continuation of the ugly trend to devalue education.⁴ We highlight the need for lovers of knowledge production to stay vigilant and at the same time implore college administrators and state legislators to keep a cool head about the worth and place of higher education⁵ in our democratic society. Universities have long been the engine of economic development in our country. We at PJSA are concerned that the true value that colleges and universities bring to so many communities will continue to be overlooked or denied by legislators and campus leaders driven by the economic bottom line. We fear that neoliberal management models and growth projections will guide university leaders to make unfounded decisions about both the purpose and direction of higher education. Administrative decisions are often not made with full consideration of the public and societal value contained within our institutions, but rather with the same past assumptions and injustices. We urge leaders not to miss important opportunities for both change and expansion.

In a recent letter to the U.S. House of Representatives, the American Council on Education argues that: "The pandemic is striking during the height of the admissions process, and the requirement to close physical campuses for extended periods, along with justifiable concerns among current and prospective students about when and if to return to campus, are problems higher education did not have in the Great Recession."⁶ University administrators only concerned about revenue can get caught up in the dropping enrollment trap and constrict university spending at a time when the need to spend creatively and adapt may be the greatest. To get out from under the Covid-19 rock we must be creative, innovative, and not afraid to take risks - all attributes that have put U.S. colleges and universities in the driver's seat of economic development and technological innovation for generations.

University administrators must resist the urge to cut further the humanities or fields that seem less popular to current students because they appear too expensive due to limited enrollments. These lesser enrolled fields hold the brain trust of our democratic civilization; they are the greatest value to the future of creative thinking and democratic citizenship. Already, on our campuses we are hearing talk of academic

review of programs and hiring freezes. These are worrying harbingers of economic corrections that may be more based in fear than on evidence or the creativity of playful transformation work. We urge leaders in higher education to resist the crisis mentality. With support from the federal government we urge university administrators to use this crisis as a pivotal moment to creatively plan ways that the national trust in higher education can be restored and strengthened.

¹ For more on trauma sensitive schools: “in which all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported and where addressing trauma’s impact on learning on school wide basis is at the center of its educational mission. ... [it] allows for the necessary teamwork, coordination, creativity, and sharing of responsibility for all students.” See: Cole, S. F., O’Brien, J. G., Gadd, M. G., Ristuccia, J., Wallace, D. L., & Gregory, M. (2005). *Helping traumatized children learn: Supportive school environments for children traumatized by family violence*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Advocates for Children, Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative. See also: Cole, S. F., Eisner, A., Gregory, M., & Ristuccia, J. (2013). *Helping traumatized children learn II: Creating and advocating for trauma-sensitive schools*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Advocates for Children, Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative.

² See Roy, Arundhati (2020). <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

³ In North Carolina, for example, the 18-24 years old population is projected to be the slowest growing age group over the next 20 years, growing by just 8% or 83,000 between 2016 and 2036. Source: Carolina Demography. 2018. Past, Present, and Future: Demographic Change and North Carolina’s Community College System. Chapel Hill, NC: Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina. Found at: <https://www.ncdemography.org/>

⁴ Harvard Business School professor [Clayton Christensen](#), in 2017, at the [Innovation + Disruption Symposium in Higher Education](#) predicted that “50 percent of the 4,000 colleges and universities in the U.S. will be bankrupt in 10 to 15 years.”

⁵ One recent 2014 report from John Hopkins University showed that the University was the state of Maryland’s largest Employer with over 48,000 employees (see: <http://web.jhu.edu/administration/gca/projects/publications-and-reports/economic-impact-report/EIR%20Documents/EIR%202014/Maryland%20One%20Page%20Summary%20EIR%202014.pdf>) Yet another report from 2018 shows that the University of Georgia’s teaching, research and service generated \$5.7 billion in economic activity across the state. (See: <https://news.uga.edu/5-7-billion-ugas-economic-impact-grows/>).

⁶ See: https://texascivilrightsreview.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/highered_fourth_covid_request.pdf - accessed April 19, 2020.