

Beyond sociological functionalism: Higher education in the age of Coronavirus

David Bateman-Schieler

Florida State University

It appears it has taken a pandemic strain of coronavirus (COVID-19/novel coronavirus/SARS-CoV-2) to cause institutions of higher education to admit the true breadth of their functionalist role in society. A common understanding of the functional sociological “role of schools is to prepare students for participation in the institutions [political, economic, social] of society” (Dodd Russell, 2013), and while colleges and universities have tended to accept their role in preparation for those institutions, curricular neutrality in regard to critical pedagogy, suggests a reluctance to admit being a participating institution themselves. However, as the coronavirus pandemic spreads and the World Health Organization recommends social distancing and self-quarantining (World Health Organization, 2020), and institutions of higher education have begun fully shifting to online instruction, many undergraduate students employees, graduate students and assistants, and entry level academic professionals are left without dependable sources of income necessary to support themselves and their dependents (Brown, 2020; Zahneis, 2020; McKie, 2020; Schleunes, 2020). Only those institutions that are able to admit their participatory political, economic, and social functions will be able to take and/or advocate for the necessary actions to prepare for what could be a much longer period of functional sociological transition.

On March 25, 2020 Sarah Brown wrote about the impact of campus closures on student employees in an article for the Chronicle of Higher Education. While this was not the first article to attempt to make clear the economic role of colleges and universities, it painted a woefully clear picture of the developing situation. Brown wrote about students whose universities were continuing to pay for expected hours, despite the students often inability to work remotely amidst a campus closure. The article made clear though that this was not the norm, and that many students were caught often in the middle, where hours were reduced and pay was only made out

for work that was able to be shifted to a remote or virtual environment. For an unfortunate group of student-employees the situation was even worse, and their employment was suspended while campus was closed.

Two weeks before the publication of the Brown article, the National Student Employment Association (NSEA) launched a member forum to discuss the implications of coronavirus on college and university student employment, and days before that the federal Office of Postsecondary Education issued guidance on the payment of federal work study funds affected by the pandemic. While the federal Office of Postsecondary Education made clear that Federal Work Study students affected by the pandemic were permitted to be paid out their remaining award balances, the NSEA forum tells a more complicated story. Specifically, a post made by a staff member from Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis (IUPUI) stated, “Here at IUPUI we will not be paying students in lieu of actually working. Indiana has some strict ghost employment laws and the university's pandemic policy states that hourly employees will not be paid unless they report to work” (National Student Employment Association, 2020). The post goes on to acknowledge that “We don't expect students to get their normal max hours per week in the remote task environment, but it will provide some students some income. Our food pantry and closet are remaining open for business on campus.”

For institutions that view their role strictly in preparing students for participation in the “real world” and which fail to understand that for many students the institution is also the “real world,” the issue only becomes more complicated as the conversation shifts to graduate employees. A March 26, 2020 article by Megan Zahneis in the Chronicle of Higher Education, dissected the graduate experience from the student, researcher, and paraprofessional/employee perspectives. Zahneis (2020) shared the story of a Duke graduate student who is paid to conduct

research in an on-campus lab. The student shared that students were emailed that they were not permitted to return to campus after spring break if they had left the metropolitan area, but that it was communicated separately that staff were expected to return to work. This confusion led the student to call multiple offices to determine the expectation of graduate students on university payroll, such as through their research lab.

For some, this pressure to return to work resulted in significant conflict between student and employee identities, and at times resulted in safety concerns (Price, 2020). But as the situation around research became clearer, and labs and archives were closed like the campuses that housed them, institutions responded. The common response – to extend tenure considerations for faculty engaged in research, with few cases of similar support for graduate research (Foley, 2020). Foley (2020) goes on to discuss the unequal economic realities of graduate students and faculty members and the disparate impact of already dissimilar institutional responses to members of its payroll. Foley, herself a PhD candidate at Harvard University, concludes the article with the poignant recognition, “Our labor sustains universities’ educational missions. Now it’s time for universities to sustain us.”

Outside the research context, Katy Krieger, writing for Inside Higher Ed (2020), discussed the impact of the shift to online instruction on graduate teaching assistants. The age-related assumption of some institutions and faculty members with respect to the digital ability of younger graduate teaching assistants, has resulted in a lions-share of the shift being left to this already taxed population. Krieger stated, “We have a lot of work to do in a short amount of time. I have spring break -- usually a time for me to visit with others and recalibrate -- to move online and get ready to build a new classroom ethos.” It is the exceptional case, such as Kim Yi Dionne a faculty member at the University of California-Riverside, that resist this burdensome reliance

on student employees (graduate assistants) bound through institutional policies to weekly hours limitations and pay, “[Dionne] was adamant, however, that any increased administrative work related to remote instruction should not fall on graduate students' shoulders” (Flaherty, 2020).

That same Flaherty (2020) article, from Inside Higher Ed, also brought attention to another class of educational employee, often forgotten about in times of institutional stress – adjunct faculty. Flaherty, shared a quote from Paula Krebs, the executive director of the Modern Languages Association (MLA), “‘The least you can do for an adjunct you’ve forced to change teaching methods midsemester is 1) pay for their time making the change and 2) guarantee that they will be able to use what they just learned by teaching for you again next semester’” (Flaherty, 2020). But this does not seem to be happening everywhere. In the United Kingdom, McKie (2020) highlights that a dire situation is growing for fixed-term contract employees (such as adjuncts). As institutions face financial constraints uncertainty is developing around the ability to extend contracts or rehire fixed-term employees. Schleunes (2020) shares, that in the United States a similar uncertainty is being felt and institutions are implementing hiring freezes until more financial certainty can be had. For fixed-term-contracted employees, including graduate teaching assistants, research assistants, and adjunct faculty, the institutional uncertainty becomes embodied in daily life.

It is then that a critical sociological frame can remind institutions that their depersonalized/organizational stress is not only personalized in its members, but is unequally embodied through systems of power, which leave the most vulnerable (low-socio-economic status (low-SES) students including graduate students and fixed-term contract employees) the most affected. This affect is contemporary, but with each passing day of social distancing and self-quarantining it is moving into the future, as well. Just three months after Moody’s crediting

agency elevated the higher education sector's credit outlook from negative to stable, the decision was reversed (Bauer-Wolf, 2020). The announcement forecasts significant financial stress as enrollment declines, particularly related to international students, and endowed returns fall due to stock market losses. But it is important to understand the classist and racialized impacts this will have on college and university campuses. Massey (1990) reminds us of the legacies of educational segregation and white flight that led to the growth of the urban Black underclass in the late 20th century. And Quadlin (2017) more recently, discusses the impact of socio-economic status on the paths that students take within higher education. The significant predicted reduction in the labor market, to which Quadlin (2017) suggests low-SES direct their studies, may not provide enough confidence to embark on costly postsecondary studies.

A retreat in state-funding (Diep, 2020; Vock, 2020; Huelsman, 2020), combined with decreases in philanthropic giving (Friga, 2020) will likely leave institutions with the uncomfortable need to raise tuition rates. This pattern of reduced non-tuition revenue and subsequent increases in tuition rates (along with decreases in educational quality) last played out during the great recession of 2008 and had yet to be fully recovered from (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2017). This pattern exists without regard to the financial ability of low-SES students, particularly those racially marginalized students still living out the modern legacy of educational segregation.

When LeBlanc (2020) and Rhyneer (2020) suggest that institutions are concerned about the future of enrollment, they might encourage institutions to respond in a manner aware of the experiences of those students who by their financial status and by the histories of racist and classist policies in the United States, are most vulnerable to significant sociological transitions. Such planning, to help bring clarity to an uncertain future, post-COVID-19, should elevate the

voices of the student employees, graduate assistants, and fixed-term contract employees that view education beyond its preparatory functional role. For these populations, higher education is not there to get you into the “real world,” it is the “real world.”

One policy consideration may be to alleviate state budgets, which have become stressed by reductions in tax revenues (due to workforce reductions related to coronavirus), through a rapid expansion of federal higher education funding, while remaining aware of classist and racist legacies within the sociology of education. A plan, such as the one proposed by Senator Elizabeth Warren (2020) could be a step in this direction. At the local, institutional level however, administrators should be called to prioritize equitable distribution of funds, so that student employees, graduate students, and fixed-term employees may be retained and that future cohorts of racially and economically disadvantaged individuals are given access to an affordable, high quality education, that does not burden them with decades of debt.

COVID-19 is so named because it was first discovered in humans in 2019. And, while it may be tempting to want to rid ourselves of coronavirus and its effects as quickly as possible, institutions must see this as a moment of reflection. The path forward must be one that recognizes the power of our collective ability, not the power of an individual’s bank account or their majoritized race.

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