

Committee Hearing Memorandum

Tuesday, June 4, 2020

Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions: “COVID-19: Going Back to College Safely”

Witnesses:

Mitchell Daniels, President, Purdue University

Dr. Christina Paxson, President, Brown University

Dr. Logan Hampton, President, Lane College

Georges Benjamin, MD, Executive Director, American Public Health Association

Executive Summary:

The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions met on June 4, 2020, to hear testimony from university presidents and American Public Health Association executive director Georges Benjamin on steps that must be taken to reopen college campuses in the fall. In his opening statement, Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN) said the “road to reopening is through testing,” a sentiment he has echoed in each of the committee’s COVID-19 hearings. Additionally, Alexander noted the unique benefits and challenges of combating the spread of coronavirus at universities, and claimed that ultimately the decision to reopen should be left up to university administrations. Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-WA) spoke on ensuring the safety of hourly employees and minority students who are more likely to be impacted by COVID-19.

In their testimonies, Mitch Daniels of Purdue University and Christina Paxson of Brown University described the protocols they will be putting in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 on their respective campuses. Logan Hampton, of Lane College, expressed the need for additional federal aid to higher education facilities, particularly HBCU’s. Specifically, he requested the expansion of Pell Grants. All of the presidents spoke about altering classroom space, testing procedures, technology services, and athletics. The final witness, Georges Benjamin, explained the American Public Health Association’s views on what is needed to safely reopen campuses. He noted that universities need clear, specific guidance from the CDC and OSHA to protect students and faculties.

Member Statements:

Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN): The question is not whether universities will open in the Fall, but how they will do it safely. Our witnesses will tell us the strategies they are using to ensure the safety

of their students. Campuses across the country are using tactics such as: expanding online course offerings, requiring masks, utilizing grab and go dining options, opening unused classes.

The only way back to campus is through widespread testing. Much more testing will be available come September. At this time, federal officials are not encouraging every student to be tested. Instead, they should follow local and state health departments. Campuses should be able to test all symptomatic, random individuals, and health care, dining, and janitorial staff.

COVID-19 plans should last for at least the full school year. The government is pursuing vaccines at warp speed, but no one expects one by August. In the second semester there should be more tests, more treatments, better contact tracing and vaccines—amidst the flu season and the return of COVID-19. It will be the Fall of 2021 before school life approaches normal.

There are several reasons colleges have an advantage in providing a safe environment for students and faculty: The first reason is that younger people have been less hurt by COVID-19.

Campus environments. Still, there is much we are still learning about the virus, and Dr. Anthony Fauci has warned against “cavalierly” assuming that young people are not at risk. Second: Colleges are notorious wasters of space. Keeping students six feet apart will be a lot easier if colleges embrace a new efficiency and use more of their classrooms and spaces throughout the day and throughout the year.

Maybe that’s a lesson that will last beyond this virus crisis. Third, tracking and tracing the virus will be easier to do at colleges – we know what classes students attend, and what dorms they live in. If colleges take it a step further and, for example, assign seats in class, infections will be even easier to track.

Fourth, a college can require students to wear masks. Campuses can make mask-wearing part of the student culture.

But college environments pose a couple of challenges as well. First, we know that 19 and 20-year-olds don’t always choose to do what’s healthiest. For example, the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that a third of college students admitted to binge drinking in the past month. So a social-distanced, mask-wearing culture in class may not always extend into the evenings and weekends. And second, 86 percent of undergraduate students are not living on campus, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. That means many students will leave and return, potentially exposing themselves and others to the virus—making social distancing and CDC-recommended health status checks all the more important.

What should the federal government’s role be in helping colleges and universities safely reopen? Providing advice from the CDC about best practices Funding for innovation, such as the shark tank I mentioned, so there’s an ample supply of rapid tests for colleges Encouraging colleges and universities to work with states and get included in their testing plans, and then help states get supplies they need for testing Funding, such as the nearly \$14 billion in CARES Act to address lost revenue due to COVID-19 and help students disrupted by the crisis Federal government can provide liability protections Beyond that, decisions should be left to the individual campuses.

To view Chairman Alexander’s full opening statement, click [here](#).

Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-WA): We have to remember the opportunity institutions of higher education have to help address disparities and systemic racism and their responsibility to do so and that means as we look at the dramatic impact COVID-19 is having on institutions of higher education and talk about ways to keep students and faculty and staff safe, we absolutely have to address the unique impact this virus has on black communities and other communities of color. We've already seen that communities of color, tribes, and other vulnerable populations face some of the harshest impacts from this pandemic. It is our job to ensure students who have been and will continue to be disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 don't see their education suffer or fall behind. So, with that in mind today we must recognize and address the disproportionate impact this crisis is having on those who are already facing challenges: students of color, first-generation college students, students experiencing homelessness, and student parents and we must let public health and science drive decision making.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced institutions of higher education to grapple with unprecedented challenges from widespread closures, to rapid transitions, to online education, to unprecedented student financial need and unemployment, and short revenue losses, and looming budget cuts. Many may not be able to reopen their doors including many historic and under-resourced colleges that serve high populations and students who have low incomes and students of color. Faculty from professors and instructors to administrative and support staff to custodial workers and food services and much more are wondering if they're even going to have a job to return to at all. And for students across this country from graduating high school seniors to community college students to students pursuing advanced degrees and more, this pandemic has completely shattered their notion of a normal school year. To navigate this new world, every single student across this country is experiencing unprecedented disruption and many students will need additional support like advising and tutoring and mental health counseling to see success in a new learning environment.

As we move towards solving the truly countless challenges facing our colleges and students, we absolutely have to keep in mind and address the unique needs of the students who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. As colleges begin to reopen safely, physically or online, we need to make sure that colleges do not rush into a decision on how to reopen without thorough consultation with. There is a very real possibility, as Dr. Fauci told us the other week, of a resurgence of coronavirus that is why colleges and universities need a detailed plan for how to keep the campus community safe regardless of how the pandemic evolves in the coming months. Our students, our faculty, staff, and college communities need to know that before colleges reopen their doors they have planned for every potential outcome, every contributing factor, and every scenario. But colleges and universities cannot do this alone. They need in-depth, actionable, and detailed guidance from the federal government on best practices when it comes to how to house and feed students safely, how to minimize class size and keep students socially distant, how to make sure library books and other shared equipment are cleaned properly and often, and when it comes to the broader community, how to keep faculty and staff members of the larger community safe and how to minimize risk when students travel to and from campus.

Witness Statements:

Mitchell Daniels: We will make our campus less dense in multiple ways. At least one-third of our staff will be required to work remotely. Our technologists have applied what they've learned about social distancing to redesign 700 classrooms and labs, and 9,500 dormitory rooms, all of which will be reconfigured with lower occupancy limits. All large-enrollment courses will be offered online as well as in person, to accommodate those who cannot or choose not to come to campus, and to further reduce in-class numbers.

We will test systematically and trace contacts of anyone testing positive for the coronavirus. Large numbers of symptomatic Boilermakers will also be tested. Among the options we are considering include random testing, tests for those with potential exposure, and tests for those living in potential "hot" spots as determined by contact tracing.

Wearing masks indoors and in any close-quarters space reduces viral transmission dramatically all by itself. Combined with rigorous hygiene and prudent social distancing, facial protection can probably provide more protection than all the extra disinfecting, plexiglass-barrier installation, HVAC improvements and other measures we take. On arrival in August, each Boilermaker will receive a kit including face masks and a thermometer for daily temperature-taking as well as the Protect Purdue Pledge asking for a commitment to at least a semester of inconvenience, not primarily for the student's own protection but for the safety of those who teach and otherwise serve them.

A final thought: We recognize that not every school can or should view the decision to reopen as we do. Unlike Purdue, many colleges were already struggling with low enrollment and precarious finances when the pandemic hit. But given what we have learned, with 45,000 students waiting and the financial wherewithal to do what's necessary, failure to take on the job of reopening would be not only anti-scientific but also an unacceptable breach of duty.

To view President Daniel's written testimony, click [here](#).

Dr. Christina Paxson: The health and safety of the students and employees who make up a college community are the top priority. As I argued in a recent op-ed for The New York Times, it should be a national priority to support colleges and universities in addressing the challenges and barriers they face in their efforts to reopen safely. This is a time when partnership between higher education and federal government and state governments is more important than ever — for the sake of the educational attainment of students across the country; the cities and states that rely heavily on institutions in their communities as major employers and economic drivers; and the research and innovation that is at the core of America's health care industry and economic competitiveness.

Institutions need the support of our federal government to gain the capacity to develop public health plans that build on three basic elements of controlling the spread of infection: test, trace and separate. At Brown, as at many colleges and universities, we are developing plans with the following features:

- Testing of all students and employees upon return to campus, testing for all symptomatic students and employees, and random testing of asymptomatic members of the community to monitor levels of infection over time.
- Traditional and technology-enabled contact tracing capacity, developed in close coordination with the Rhode Island Department of Health, so that the spread of any infection on campus can be quickly stemmed.
- Residence halls that are “de-densified” so that students have single rooms and there are fewer students per shared bathroom, plus suitable dormitory space set aside for isolation and quarantine.
- Classrooms, libraries and dining halls that are reconfigured to enable social distancing, and additional investments in cleaning and supplies for appropriate hygiene.
- Large lecture courses that are converted to “flipped” mode, so that students watch the lecture online, and gather together in smaller recitation or problem-solving sessions with their instructor.
- The development of a robust public health education campaign, so that students understand what they need to do to keep themselves, their classmates, faculty, staff and community members healthy.

To view President Paxson’s written testimony, click [here](#).

Dr. Logan Hampton: I would be remiss if I did not thank Congress and those of this committee for passing H.R. 748, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Your time, energy, and effort does not go unnoticed, and I also want to thank the President for signing this bill into law. Because of the CARES Act, Lane College has access to a total of \$5,278,608 in direct allocations. While I am thankful for this, I would be remiss if I did not share with you all that Lane College is bracing for revenue losses that will impact our ability to operate. Also, our students are enduring tough economic times that presents unique challenges, especially for students of color. With this being said, I have a number of important requests to Congress in my written testimony, but my top two asks would be that Congress provide an additional \$1 billion in funding for HBCUs, Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and Minority Serving Institutions. I would also like to firmly ask that Congress increase student grant aid in Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 by doubling the maximum Pell Grant award. The majority of my students are black Americans and black Americans are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. If the majority of my students are disproportionately impacted, then my institution is disproportionately impacted and needs the investment.

To view President Hampton’s written testimony, click [here](#).

Georges Benjamin, MD: Reopening the nation’s colleges and universities will not come with a one-size-fits-all solution, and any decisions must be science-based, data-driven and done in close consultation with state and local public health authorities. All public health decisions are based on risk reduction. We should make the assumptions that there will be people on campus with COVID-19 infection regardless of what precautions are taken at this state of the pandemic and the level of previously infected individuals in the community.

Academic institutions should first follow the guidelines published by CDC. Nothing I say today is meant to be in variance of that guidance. In addition to students and faculty, all workers at an institution should be protected in the workplace by enforceable workplace regulations. Congress should require the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to propose an emergency temporary standard (ETS) for infectious disease to protect workers from COVID-19. California's Aerosol Transmissible Diseases Standard could serve as a model. Without specific safety mandates, academic institutions are left with little enforceable direction, and the result is the increased potential for rapid spread of the disease in the workplace and into our communities.

All institutions should be working from the premise that they will have a case of COVID-19 on campus during the academic year. They should also assume that while students are less likely to have serious disease when infected, the risk for serious disease is not zero. The academic institution must have the organizational capacity to rapidly identify such a case or an outbreak of disease and undertake effective disease containment and control. This includes the ability to ensure adequate rapid PCR testing for COVID-19 and contact tracing. A strong partnership with their local and state health department is essential for testing, contact tracing and ongoing disease surveillance. Together, the academic institution and the public health agency should agree on a testing strategy and plan. Elements should clearly define priorities of testing, the role of symptom-based strategies and how best to test employees who are of high risk either because of underlying disease or their on- or off-campus occupations. Examples of higher risk occupations for consideration might include cafeteria workers, the health clinic nurse or staff living or working in residential dorms.

To view Dr. Benjamin's written testimony, click [here](#).

Key Exchanges

Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN): How much advice do you want from the federal government on whether or not you should open in August/September?

Daniels: We want advice from the CDC on health guidelines, but ultimately, each university is different and should be left to make this call based on their ability to protect the welfare of their students.

Alexander: What is the lasting impact of tele-learning?

Paxson: We have learned that tele-learning can be very effective. Another important area is the utilization of telemedicine for mental health and counseling services. We have found that when students are in states that permit telemedicine, and there is some bureaucracy around this, telemedicine is an extremely beneficial way to support our students.

Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-WA): If testing levels remain where they are today, will campuses be able to open safely?

Benjamin: It would be a real challenge. We need a bare minimum of 5,000 tests per day.

Murray: Black communities and communities of color are hit much harder by COVID-19. What specifically are your universities planning on doing to address this when you reopen?

Daniels: We will be paying special attention to vulnerable populations and minority students are among that group.

Paxson: Challenges of inequity are one of the major reasons why we should reopen. Education is an equalizer.

Hampton: As an HBCU, we are impacted harder by these disparities. We need additional investment to help our students overcome this. Doubling the Pell Grant, for example.

Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME): In addition to serving students, universities employ thousands of individuals. Campus closures impacted hourly workers particularly hard. Should there be different testing requirements for employees and students who live off campus and commute to school/work each day?

Daniels: Yes, we are looking closely at that.

Collins: I am worried that if we do not open universities we will have many students who have debt but do not finish their degrees.

Paxson: Persistence is something we will have to watch closely.

Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA): I am hearing many pleas for funding and assistance from witnesses and the broader higher education community. However, there is no prospect for additional COVID-19 relief legislation in the Senate in June. I urge the Senate to listen to these pleas and understand that waiting is not an option.

Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI): All schools should be prepared to have at least one case on campus. I learned that the University of Wisconsin ran out of reagents. The administration has said private labs must rely on existing supply chains. Can you describe why schools need to have all of the testing platforms and supplies on site in order to respond to new cases?

Benjamin: If you don't have the testing capacity within your own program, you are going to have to have strong partnerships with someone who does. Ultimately, supply chain problems have been the biggest barrier to testing. Without adequate testing universities will not be able to function.

Baldwin: I am concerned about non-traditional students and employees who are in a more vulnerable age range. That is why I introduced the Every Worker Protection Act, which requires the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to issue emergency temporary standards that cover all workplaces and requires workplaces to implement infectious disease control plans to keep their workers safe. You stated that OSHA needs to promote such a standard, do you believe that this standard should be in place prior to universities opening?

Benjamin: Yes. Those standards create a floor that everyone can rely on. They are essential.

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Sen. Doug Jones (D-AL): I have urged for an additional \$1 billion for HBCUs. What would your institution do with this funding?

Hampton: We will use funding to enhance safety measures on campus and assist students with technology costs.

Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA): I am concerned that the CDC guidance for higher education reopening does not address testing plans. As the Chairman says, the road to reopening is through testing.

Sen. Jacky Rosen (D-NV): What are you doing to address the digital divide among your students, particularly as it relates to broadband?

Paxson: We have worked hard this spring to ensure all our students have internet access or hotspots.

Hampton: Lane College is sourcing devices and providing hotspots and data plans for students.