

US colleges and universities continue jobs bloodbath as they press to open in the fall

Alexander Fangmann
6 June 2020

Colleges and universities throughout the United States are carrying out mass layoffs, furloughs and pay cuts of university workers, including faculty, in response to budget pressures stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Facing declines in enrollment and tuition revenue and losses from unused dorms and other facilities, public universities and colleges are additionally being hit by cuts to state spending on higher education.

A report in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* suggested that as of May 26, at least 48,086 higher education employees have been affected by layoffs or furloughs, whether temporary or permanent. The *Chronicle* report also noted that Bureau of Labor Statistics numbers from early May suggest there were 19,200 fewer workers in higher education this March than there were in March of 2019.

Among the universities facing deep cuts is the University of Wisconsin system, which is facing cuts that University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee chancellor Mark Mone has called “catastrophic.” The 26 campuses of the UW system stand to see a potential revenue collapse of up to \$100 million for next year out of a total budget of \$650 million, on top of this year’s \$18 million deficit. Adding to the damage is a five percent cut in state funding carried out by Democratic Governor Tony Evers in collaboration with the Republican-led state legislature.

At the University of Hawaii, the official in charge of the budget, Kalbert Young, told the university’s board of regents in a meeting, “There will be prolonged, possibly perpetual changes to how the university is run.”

Out of several presented budget scenarios, in the worst case the university would stand to lose 25 percent of its funding from the state and 15 percent of its tuition

revenue. This would translate to a \$181 million decline from its current \$1 billion operating budget.

Jan Sullivan, a UH regent and COO of Oceanit, said “We have to do cuts, and they have to be done in a way that will leave the university standing.” Young warned the regents not to get too specific about plans, saying, “I don’t know if anyone would want to throw ideas out here in a public meeting right now.” He added, “The depth will be significant, maybe never seen.”

At the University of Texas at San Antonio, president Taylor Eighmy told university workers in a letter to prepare for budget cuts of 9–10 percent, which would include layoffs.

A group of faculty department chairs responded, “As a group we are committed to ensuring that student success and research excellence are maintained as the core principles underlying our budgetary decisions.” If departments are forced to get rid of teaching and research faculty, the council said, “We are very concerned that those two core principles will be seriously undermined by a 9 percent cut to academic programs.”

In response to shortfalls, the University of Alaska board is considering the merger of the University of Alaska Southeast into the University of Alaska Anchorage, the University of Alaska Fairbanks or possibly both. Also on the table are cuts to around 50 degree or certificate programs. Last year, the UA board agreed to \$70 million in cuts to state funding over three years after Governor Mike Dunleavy proposed cutting \$135 million from the system.

Even in states that are not cutting funding outright, schools will still face funding shortfalls and budget cuts. While Illinois kept state funding for colleges and universities flat, they will still be forced to make cuts given regular and pandemic-driven cost increases.

Illinois state support of higher education is also still lower than it was in 2015, even without taking inflation into account. Moreover, many Illinois schools, like their counterparts elsewhere, are public in name only, with the majority of their revenue coming from other sources, primarily tuition.

The concern to stem the tide of financial losses on campuses, including extremely lucrative college sports, especially football, has led many schools to announce they will be opening in the fall, despite very real concerns about the ongoing pandemic and the near-impossibility of maintaining social-distancing or otherwise preventing the spread of COVID-19 on college campuses.

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which has been tracking announcements, 68 percent of the 890 colleges being tracked are planning for in-person instruction in the fall. Many of the schools anticipate ending the in-person part of the fall term at the Thanksgiving break, in order to reduce the possibility of travel causing a coronavirus outbreak. Only a minority of the schools being tracked, 7 percent, are planning for instruction to be completely or largely online.

The drive for an in-person fall semester has led some college and university presidents to call for blanket immunity from COVID-related lawsuits should students get sick or die. In a May discussion between Vice President Mike Pence, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and 14 college presidents, University of Texas at El Paso president Heather Wilson, a former Republican congresswoman and Secretary of the Air Force, suggested the best way the government could be helpful “is to have some kind of liability protection.”

US President Donald Trump has linked the reopening of college campuses to the overall reopening of the economy, saying, “I don’t consider our country coming back if the schools are closed.”

Senate Republicans, led by Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander, have floated the idea of a general protection from liability for colleges and schools as long as they follow “reasonable practices.” Linking this protection from lawsuits to school reopening, Alexander said, “Schools and businesses will be less likely to reopen if they think they’ll be sued if someone gets sick.”

Regardless of whether any action is taken at the federal level, some states have already granted blanket

immunity to colleges. North Carolina may have gone furthest, giving immunity to businesses and schools with no specific requirements to follow, while Utah and Alabama have approved measures limiting lawsuits or raising the bar of proof in such cases.

Despite the very real danger to many faculty and students from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the faculty unions have been largely working to push for reopening along the lines being used by states, accepting as good coin the idea that it is possible to maintain social distancing or other effective disease-control measures on campus.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on students and faculty to oppose any premature opening of college and university campuses. The wealth of the capitalists must be seized to provide full funding for higher education, and to prevent the massive layoffs and tuition increases that are being implemented, as part of a broader socialist transformation of the economy. All educators should form rank-and-file safety committees to ensure safe working conditions and job security, and students should form branches of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) to aid in this fight.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact