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Open Campuses for the Elite and Restricted Campuses for Others: Class Segregation in Public Higher Education During the COVID-19 Shutdown

Mark E. Fincher
Mississippi State University

ABSTRACT

Segregation is often seen in terms of race. However, it can also be based on socioeconomic status. Public colleges and universities in the U.S. had highly divergent responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite operating under similar health and legal considerations, campuses at most elite institutions were treated as essential functions while the neighboring campuses of less elite institutions were often treated as non-essential functions. This was problematic during the pandemic, but the discrimination appears to be continuing after the emergency has passed. The policy of continued reduction of the role of the college campus is an attractive option for less exclusive institutions. While a campus is most valuable for the more marginalized students, it is their campuses that closed and remain limited. The community college campus is the foundation of higher education for many students. The purpose of this article was to explore the value of the campus experience.

Keywords: access, segregation, elite, COVID-19, public university, public community college

The responses of public institutions of higher education in the U.S. to the Covid-19 pandemic have been highly divergent (Healy et al., 2020). In practice, campuses at most elite institutions were treated as essential functions while the nearby campuses of many less elite institutions were being treated as non-essential (Krebs, 2020). The continued reduction of the college campus is an attractive option for less exclusive institutions. While a campus is most valuable for the more marginalized students (Xu & Jaggers, 2016), it is these campuses that closed with some never returning to the

previous level of activity. The college campus is the foundation of higher education for many students. It is where many students can best gain knowledge, interpersonal and communications skills. These skills and experiences provide the rich learning that employers value and increase the capability of the student. The purpose of this paper is to explore the value of the campus experience and how it has changed for some during and after the COVID-19 shutdown. This situation can be better understood through an examination of COVID-19 pandemic related responses and their impact on students.

SEGREGATION BY CLASS THROUGH CAMPUS CLOSURE AND REDUCTION

For many institutions, the decision to keep a campus closed during 2020 was highly individualized (Smalley, 2020). While local conditions matter, status and public profile seem to have driven many decisions on campus closings. Maintaining an open campus was the common standard for elite public institutions while others, including many community colleges were closed.

The inequity of this situation is striking. An examination of neighboring institutions shows the divergence being more in line with institutional eliteness than the influence of COVID-19. This disparity of response is visible through the diverse examples of California and Texas.

A TALE OF TWO CLASSES: CALIFORNIA

Public higher education in California is somewhat unique in that its institutions are divided into three separate systems. The University of California System (UC) the California Community Colleges (CCC), and the California State System (Cal State). The UC System is made up of residential research institutions located throughout the state with the highest costs, admission standards, and public profiles (University of California, 2020).

The CCC system and the Cal State System, while being similarly dispersed throughout the state, have institutions with lower requirements, costs, and public profiles (The California State University, 2019). Cal State and CCC institutions form one class of institutions in that their students are similarly diverse in terms of socio-economic status, ethnicity, and familial experience with higher education. Cal State universities and CCC colleges have historically provided a quality campus experience, with abundant social organizations, sporting events, special interest groups, academic support, and cultural events (The California State University, 2019). The primary difference between the systems has been in the demographics of the student body, the research focus of the faculty, and the public profile of the institutions (The California State University, 2019; University of California, 2020). Due to similar locations, there was little institutional difference in COVID-19 risk.

Despite this clear similarity between the UC system and the CCC and Cal State systems, their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown could not have been more different. The Cal State System was one of the first large higher education entities to announce that of its institutions would remain closed for the fall of 2020

(Burke, 2020). Similarly, the CCC system kept its campuses closed throughout the 2020-2021 year (Garcia, 2021). In contrast, the UC System Chancellor announced the UC institutions could open their campuses with restrictions.

Even as state and local restrictions were implemented and reduced throughout California, the disparity continued. While the UC institutions maintained operational campuses, their Cal State counterparts moved all functions to a limited online delivery or eliminated them entirely (Burke, 2020; Hubler & Cowen, 2020). The contrast between the elite and non-elite institutions permeates the collegiate experience but can be most clearly seen by examining the campus services offered in the first month of the fall 2020 term. The system flagship UC-Berkley welcomed students back to campus with social-distancing restrictions and limitations for the fall 2020 semester (Hubler & Cowen, 2020), but campus services, residence halls and the recreation center were all open (Kell, 2020). Athletic training continued, and after initially cancelling seasons, varsity games were played. The university even provided on-campus care for employee children.

In contrast, nearby Cal State East Bay was online only for the entire 2020-2021 academic year (Cal State East Bay, 2020). Nearby Berkeley City College of the CCC was closed with almost all classes, offices, and services being online only. These less elite institutions are very close to UC Berkley but were treated differently. The divergence was quite clear. Students at the elite university largely received the full benefits of a campus experience while the others did not.

The inequality of access in the Bay Area was standard across California. Open for the elite and closed for others was the standard. In California this became the norm (see Table 1).

Table 1: California Data Summary Table

System	System Focus	Students Served	Cost	Campus Status
University of California System	Highly Selective Research High Public Profile	Highly Prepared High SES Predominantly White and Asian	Highest	Fully Open
California State System	Access Oriented Lower Standards Lower Public Profile	Limited Preparation First-Generation Mixed SES Greater Black and Latine %	Lower	Closed
California Community Colleges	Open Access Lowest Public Profile	Predominantly First-Generation Greater Developmental Need Greater Black/Latine	Lowest	Closed

A particularly concerning outcome of this very uneven and inequitable response is that things have apparently not gone back to the way they were done in 2019. The Cal State system underwent a planned change of chancellors in December of 2020. The original chancellor who made the immediate decision to close the campuses for a year also announced that savings could be made and learning advantages could come from more digital operations (Smith, 2020). His successor made it a point to announce that things would not be the same again at Cal State institutions (Seltzer, 2020), and that the future would be more hybrid and less of a traditional campus-based model. This has not been associated with success, as the Cal State system has had a substantial drop in enrollment and in 2024 is facing a 1.5-billion-dollar deficit (Smith, 2023). It is especially disappointing that the much of the fiscal and enrollment problems are driven by a massive drop in Black/African American, Latine, and first-generation college students for which Cal State institutions had been so critical.

The California Community College system has also suffered during the time after the COVID-19 shutdown. Substantial declines in enrollment and upward transfer have occurred across the system, and this has been most visible among non-white students. Calls have been made to make investments in activities to promote retention and completion in hopes of reversing the post-COVID trend (Perez et al., 2022). A complete departure from this recent downward trend Calbrite College. This is a new community college in California that has no traditional campus and delivers classes entirely in an asynchronous online format. Founded just before the start of the pandemic shutdown as a small resource for working adults, Calbrite has grown rapidly and far beyond its original goals. It is now of substantial size in comparison to other CCC institutions and is rapidly expanding. While this model is quite laudable for its intended purpose of providing additional career enhancing education for working adults who have presumably already managed to gain some of the skills that can come from a campus-based education, the Calbrite student body is now about ten-percent traditional aged and forty-percent unemployed (Calbrite, 2023). This likely means that half of the Calbrite student body would be better served with a richer and campus-based college experience. The expansion of the mission of Calbrite College may be the most visible sign of the continuing trend towards maintaining the reduction in campus activities that began with the COVID-19 shutdown. It is, however, not the only sign. Prior to the shutdown, about twenty percent of the CCC student body was online (Payares-Montoya, 2022). As of the spring of 2022, well after the campuses were fully reopened, that percentage was still fifty percent (Payares-Montoya, 2022).

Unlike California, the institutional independence of public higher education in Texas allows for an institution level examination. While most public institutions in Texas quickly returned to having open campuses in the fall of 2020, the exceptions indicate unequal access.

UNEQUAL ACCESS IN TEXAS: A TALE OF TWO COUNTIES

Travis County

The flagship urban institution in the state is the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin). It is in the south-central portion of the state but serves a statewide and international student body. Like most Texas public institutions, it opened in fall of 2020 with restrictions. The residence halls were open, a full slate of student affairs and academic services were available, and the football team hosted games. The restrictions were difficult and expensive, but the university provided a fully functioning campus for its students. UT-Austin treated the provision of a campus experience as an essential function, to its student's benefit. UT-Austin is a selective institution with a higher cost of attendance and a relatively low number of first-generation college students. Less than 29% of its student body is made up of Black/African Americans and Latines and the student body largely comes from affluent families (University of Texas at Austin, 2020).

The students at neighboring Austin Community College (ACC) were not so fortunate. The campus was closed to the public through the spring of 2021, and face-to-face interactions were all but eliminated (Austin Community College, 2021). ACC is non-selective and has a low-cost of attendance. Most of its students are from families earning under $50,000 per year. Many are first generation and 40% of ACC students are Latine or Black/African American (Garza, 2019).

UT-Austin and ACC operate in the same city: Austin, Texas. They are under the same legal and health authority. Yet UT-Austin was fully functioning and ACC's campus that was closed to the public. UT-Austin, like many flagship institutions around the country, has drawn historically high applications and interest since the COVID-19 shutdown and has fully returned to its previous level of campus operations. ACC, however, has had a downturn in overall enrollment with a substantial increase in students taking fully online classes (Remadna, 2023). The elite students are getting just as much of the campus experience as before, while students at ACC get even less.

The situation in Travis County might be muddled by the fact that the two institutions are a flagship university and a community college. The divergent provision of open campuses in Texas becomes clearer, however, when examining the area around Dallas County. Dallas County has two non-flagship public universities and four area community college districts.

Dallas County

Two hundred miles to the north of the University of Texas at Austin is the University of Texas at Dallas (UT-Dallas, 2020 is located in Dallas county's northern edge. Its student body has few who are first-generation or are eligible for a Federal Pell Grant. Less than 46% of the student body are from homes earning under $50,000 per year and 22% are from homes with annual earnings over $110,000. The racial makeup of UT-Dallas is over 90% Caucasian and Asian. The University of North Texas at Dallas (UNT-Dallas) is located in Dallas County near its southern border (Crane, 2020).

UNT-Dallas has a student body where over 70% of are first generation and more than 80% are either Black/African American or Latine (University of North Texas, 2020). A striking 76% of the UNT-Dallas students come from homes earning less than $50,000 per year (Univstats, 2020). UNT-Dallas is both less selective and less expensive than UT-Dallas. They both have residence halls, compete in lower profile sports conferences, and have similar ancillary revenue opportunities. Much like in the California example, the Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD) provides a second lower price and lower profile institution in Dallas County. Unlike the public universities, the colleges of the DCCCD are spread throughout the county.

Other than the affluence and elite status of the respective student bodies, UT-Dallas and UNT-Dallas are virtually identical in their situations related to the COVID-19 response. They operated under the exact same legal mandates from Dallas County. They, however, responded very differently to the COVID-19 pandemic. UT-Dallas fully opened its campus in the fall with substantial reduction in crowding and class sizes. Activities and services continued with enforced social distancing and mask wearing. An early announcement was made that the fall 2021 semester would operate without any restrictions (University of Texas at Dallas, 2021). UNT-Dallas, however, basically became a fully online institution. All classes and services were moved online, and all activities were cancelled (University of North Texas at Dallas, 2021).

At first glance, it might be thought that this divergence in campus access was just racism. This could not be further from the case. The University of North Texas System descends from North Texas State University, which was the first public university in Texas to have a racially integrated student body. By 1956 the university had a colorblind undergraduate application and soon become the state's first predominantly white public university to have a Black administrator and a Black regent (Thurman, 2004). UNT-Dallas was purposely founded in an area with a majority minority population to better serve Black/African American and Latine students. UNT-Dallas exists to provide a quality collegiate campus near those students. Excluding racism, the remaining factors are class and affluence. This can also be seen in the area community colleges.

Unlike with the California example, the community colleges in Texas are county-based independent entities. Responses to COVID-19 differed by college. Dallas College, an urban multi-college system in Dallas County, was the first institution in the state to announce that it would keep its campuses closed through the fall (Owens, 2020). It was soon announced that they would remain closed through the 2020-2021 academic year. Neighboring Tarrant County College, (a multi-campus community college in and around Fort Worth) also remained closed (Tarrant County College, 2020). These urban community college systems serve the least affluent parts of the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area, and their campuses were basically closed. This contrasts with Collin College (Collin College, 2020) and North Central Texas College (North Central Texas College, 2020), the community colleges that serve the most affluent counties in the metropolitan area. These institutions were open with restrictions before the fall of 2020.

As in California, the difference in the tactics of these Texas institutions seems to be related to the exclusivity and profile of the college or university. Like California,

the institutions doing critical work for the least advantaged students did so with closed campuses. California and Texas were different, but both had closed campuses for the disadvantaged but maintained open campuses for the elite. This can best be understood in terms of what makes the campus valuable.

Also like the California example, the University of North Texas system has used the experience of the COVID-19 shutdown to as an opportunity to diminish campus activities. A system vice president penned a national article penned an article decrying the end of the lecture hall, along with the spurious claim that online lectures were superior and would not limit other campus experiences for traditional students while significantly cutting costs (Fein & Heap, 2020). After the COVID-19 shutdown had ended, UNT-Dallas strategic plan included building on the online education experience of 2020 to expand the institutions online programming and online student services (Williams et al., 2022). This is even though the institution largely exists to provide on-ground education in its low-income location. On the community college side, Dallas College moved to maintain greater online programming while other enrollment declined (Buice, 2021). This can be easily seen in two ways. First, Dallas College has the declared intention to provide every program in a fully online mode whenever possible (Dallas College, 2023a). Second, the college went from having 46% of its students taking at least one online course in 2019 to having 67% taking at least one in 2022 (Dallas College, 2023b).

THE CAMPUS EXPERIENCE MATTERS: EVEN MORE SO FOR THE MARGINALIZED STUDENT

Colleges provide a better learning environment than most students can find online or at home. Vibrant on-campus experiences can powerfully enhance the learning experience of the students (Xu & Jaggers, 2016). A classroom can be valuable to most students as the richest form of communication is face-to-face (Tierney, 2020).

Marginal student populations have the most to gain from a rich campus learning experience, and consequently have the most to lose from their absence. Students, who are first generation, low-SES, have learning challenges or students with developmental education needs, and ethnic minorities (Sublett, 2021), can all be expected to suffer from limited offerings.

Conversely, enhanced learning support can always be beneficial, but it may provide the greatest benefit to at-risk students (Weitzer, 2020). Many learning enhancements, such as seminars, lectures, projects, advising, and workshops, cannot be effectively provided off campus. Limiting these experiences may have a particularly negative impact on more vulnerable students (Weitzer, 2020).

The social and cultural aspects of higher education campuses greatly benefit many (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students with a rich campus experience are advantaged in learning how to develop cultural capital and social capital (Jensen & Jetten, 2016). The personal abilities needed to develop these types of capital are highly valued professionally and relate to economic prosperity in the United States. What are often referred to by employers as soft skills are boosted by developing social and cultural capital. Most students can benefit from campus activities, clubs, performing groups and sports teams/events, but these are often the most critical for

students from less-advantaged backgrounds (Jensen & Jetten, 2016). Consequently, the ethnic groups most harmed by closed campuses should be Latines and Black/African American students.

LONG-TERM IMPACT OF A SHORT-TERM SOLUTION: PERMANENT CAMPUS REDUCTION

While this disparity of educational quality is ethically troubling in the short-term, the long-term connotations of this situation could be dire and far reaching in terms of the access to quality college and university experiences in the U.S. Campus closures were generally described as short-term responses to a temporary emergency. Forces outside of the control of higher education leaders provide a strong indication to the contrary. Many campuses that were closed in the fall of 2020 remained closed long after most of the population had functional immunity to the COVID-19 danger. The elimination of an entire year of full-service campus access was a substantial loss to the students of these institutions (Weitzer, 2020). This extended the challenge to students and normalized the practice of limiting campus interactions. Other considerations are now causing institutions and policy makers to continue the policy of limited campus interaction.

Decades of diminishing state support for higher education are unlikely to be reversed during the greatest relative loss of state tax revenue in U.S. history (National Governor's Association, 2020; Soergel, 2020). Simultaneously, states were expected to fund costly responses to the pandemic (Mitchell, 2020). Consequently, state funding for many institutions is expected to continue to decline. The disruption of campus-based revenue sources and off-budget expenditures to provide online education in mid-semester in response to the pandemic exacerbated this lost funding for the institutions that stayed close (Mitchell, 2020). This and the political movement toward providing free college, in all likelihood, will increase the attractiveness of a lower cost delivery method for higher education. Low-cost efforts are often centered in the community college, regardless of its impact on the student. Minimally functioning campuses with large online enrollments where few students physically attend will not only lead to a substantially lower quality of educational experience, but it will also likely lead to at least somewhat lower costs. Many institutions that made the necessary investments to temporarily offer a high volume of online courses for a long period of time are in a poor financial position to return to a campus-based model in the future. This condition will incline institutions to maintain the shift to providing a less active campus experience, whether that was their original intent or not. While attractive on the surface, the negative impact of this strategic shift will be substantial and centered on the most at-risk students.

FINDINGS: THE END RESULT

Campuses provide a tremendous value to college and university students. This has been widely known for generations, sometimes conveniently forgotten in recent years as cheaper alternative delivery methods have become technically feasible (Laberge, et.al., 2020). The experience of the COVID-19 shutdown had the unfortunate benefit

of making clear the value of rich campus educational experiences by taking them away. Students at elite public institutions needed open campuses and they were provided. They are not unique in this need (Sublett, 2021). Students from less advantaged backgrounds as well as affluent students need this support at least as much as their more affluent counterparts (Tierney, 2020). Regardless of the intent behind it, a separation of higher education access occurred and continues to exist. The campus experience is being maintained as an essential function for the students of elite public institutions while it is being diminished and treated as a non-essential luxury for many more marginal students. It is evident from the examples of California and Texas that the services and educational opportunities for the elite were and continue to be protected while the same cannot be said at many institutions where the elite do not attend. The idea of providing broad higher education access where the elite are given the top educational experiences while the others are given something less is not new. This can be easily seen in the higher education contributions and failings of Alabama Governor George Wallace (Katsinas, 1994).

Expanded And Separated Higher Education Access: The Vision of George Wallace

While being arguably the most prominent supporter of government mandated racial segregation in the United States, George Wallace only took this stance after he lost a gubernatorial election in 1958, in which he was endorsed by the Alabama chapter of the NAACP (Jackson, 1998). Contrary to popular opinion, Governor George Wallace was an aggressive proponent of expanded access to quality higher education while being the face of segregation (Katsinas, 1994). In his later years he became anti-segregation. While his actions for and against segregation were clearly influenced by political opportunism, his commitment to providing broad collegiate access was clear in his establishing Alabama's two-year colleges (Katsinas, 1994).

This expansion of higher education access occurred in 1963, at the beginning of his first of many terms as governor (Pearson, 1998). This is notable in that 1963 also saw him standing in the schoolhouse door to announce his defying a court order to desegregate the University of Alabama (Pearson, 1998). This shows the elitism and expedience aspect of the Wallace vision.

The Post-COVID Version of the Wallace Philosophy

There are striking parallels between the approach of many institutions after the COVID-19 shutdown and that of Governor George Wallace in 1963. The movement toward off-campus, low interaction programming creates two divergent experiences. The education in its simplest form is available to almost everyone, but the best is preserved for the elite. This programming difference is driven by expediency and not seen as providing equal quality. Asynchronous online programming is not equal to a rich campus experience in equipping students to develop social and cultural capital in a professional environment (Jensen & Jetten, 2016). The Wallace approach provided basic access to higher education but maintained qualitative inequality. The institutions he created were valuable to Black/African American students but could

not provide equal experiences or outcomes to the University of Alabama. This was done for political expediency despite its clear inequality (Katsinas, 1994).

While the similarities between post-COVID changes in access and George Wallace's efforts in 1963 are striking, it is the differences that are disturbing. While the governor's efforts were eventually ruled unconstitutional, are blatantly offensive by 21st century standards, and he himself denounced them in his later years, they were somewhat forward thinking in 1963. These efforts produced far greater college attendance among Black/African American in Alabama (Katsinas, 1994) during a time when such attendance was poor across the country. While a more just and effective form of racial segregation seems offensive today, it was at least a functional step forward. This cannot be said for the post-COVID changes. Simple access has been maintained, but the shift away from the campus that began during the shutdown is reducing the real quality of the education that can be accessed by the less privileged. This qualitative reduction in higher education that is available to the less affluent likely diminishes the value for the student who receives it. It is particularly troubling that much of American higher education is embracing an approach that the younger George Wallace would appreciate, but the older and wiser Governor Wallace would reject.

What Can College and University Professionals Do to Promote True Equality of Access?

Higher education leaders and faculty members are uniquely positioned to influence the collegiate experience. What they provide for students is foundational and influences all that follows for the student. Limited campus tactics are promoted for a variety of reasons. Some of these, such as adapting to the schedule of working professionals, have merit. They do not, however, eliminate the need for a campus experience for most undergraduate students. Providing the rich, full campus experience is ultimately an issue of equal treatment and educational quality. Political and financial forces make reducing the provision of campus interaction attractive to politicians and administrators, but it need not be done. The college community can work to maintain fully functioning campuses. The marginalized students whose futures are at stake cannot speak for themselves. Colleges and universities must do so.

This can be done by emphasizing the value of the campus and making all its advantages available to a wider geographic range at a relatively low price. Due to their geographic dispersion, community colleges are uniquely capable of doing this. They can now provide a more efficient campus experience rather than a reduced one. This can be done through leveraging the investments made and lessons learned during the COVID-19 shutdown. Faculty and leaders can encourage institutions to use these processes and technologies to promote student engagement rather than avoiding it. Most institutions are now capable of classes with multiple synchronous live connections to multiple locations. They can also easily record and archive class meetings for later viewing. Administrative and student service functions can be fully performed with a much smaller number of campus visits than before. Team and group activities can be done virtually some of the time without a substantial loss of

connection (Laberge et al., 2020). Consequently, students who live too far away to commute to campus daily can now have a rich campus experience with far fewer trips to campus. This capacity to barely function off-campus can be used to create a fully functional campus experience with limited attendance. Many potential students have challenges that preclude them getting to campus daily. This does not mean that they do not need this experience. Colleges can now provide this crucial campus experience in a more efficient manner.

DISCUSSION

The responses of the discussed examples in the states of California and Texas fell short of the goal of providing equal treatment and access to all students. The decisions made in response to the COVID-19 epidemic disadvantaged the less advantaged students. This may be indicative of a wide-ranging problem and a long-term trend. For decades, public colleges and universities have provided high quality campus educational experiences to non-elite students much like those at flagship state universities. This provided the ladder for hard working students to become just as capable as their elite counterparts. Every time one of these institutions ceases to provide a fully functioning campus experience, that opportunity diminishes. The campus experience is indeed an essential function and diminishing it for the less advantaged while preserving it for the elite is segregation by economic class in its most basic form. The fact that this segregation is not based on race does not reduce its impact. Ongoing study of this trend could be very valuable to understanding and promoting quality higher education access.

Conclusion

Decisions were made in response to the COVID-19 epidemic that were not equally costly to all students. For some, the collegiate experience was largely maintained while for others it was materially diminished. These results decisions were disturbingly reminiscent of the 1963 higher education vision of George Wallace. While they were not made necessarily made to take political advantage of racial segregation, students were treated quite differently by class. Class segregation would seem unacceptable in current society, yet that occurred and may be continuing to occur with frequency. This is class segregation today, it will be segregation tomorrow, and unless resisted by public colleges and universities, could be segregation forever.

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MARK E. FINCHER, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Community College Leadership at Mississippi State University. He studies higher education finance and strategy. His primary interests are the affordability of higher education and the success and well-being of students. Email: mfincher@meridian.msstate.edu