

**Lessons from the Field: Understanding Philanthropy's Role  
in Supporting Higher Education's Recovery  
from the Pandemic**

**Joselin E. Cisneros**

The Kresge Foundation, Troy, Michigan, U.S.A.

**Edward J. Smith**

The Kresge Foundation, Troy, Michigan, U.S.A.

---

**Abstract**

*The coronavirus has magnified existing racial injustices and educational inequities. Philanthropy will play a key role in facilitating higher education's recovery from the pandemic, but its relationship with the field needs to evolve to enact a more equitable and sustainable future. Informed by survey responses from 30 grantee partners (e.g., college leaders, scholars, research organizations, and community-based nonprofits), one foundation is on a journey to ensure that its relationships with the field are grounded in a deep understanding of partners' needs and continued service to America's most marginalized college students during the pandemic. This essay features what the foundation has learned as a result of its grantees' persistence and the actions it will undertake to further support educational equity.*

**Keywords:** College access and success; educational equity; education philanthropy.

---

## **COVID-19 and the Exacerbation of Inequities in the US**

The global pandemic has highlighted ways in which systemic racism destroys lives and livelihoods. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities in the United States have been ravaged by COVID-19 and its associated economic fallout (Brown, 2020). The aftermath is not accidental; the virus and economic shutdown exacerbated longstanding societal ills, replicated and created new barriers to social mobility, and increased health disparities. Postsecondary education is ground zero for the pandemic's perniciousness, reflecting society's gross inequities while being brutalized by its impacts. Yet, community-based organizations and mission-oriented universities remain committed to making the higher education sector more just, equitable, and student-centered.

This essay analyzes survey responses from 30 grantees supported by a private, nonprofit philanthropic organization to understand how they have adapted their programming, modified organizational infrastructures, and maximized varied forms of capital to ensure college students' continued progress. Our analysis suggests that although these organizations face tremendous challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, they remain committed to serving higher education's most vulnerable populations. Most are finding creative solutions to support students and their families by leveraging collaborations that develop emergency aid programs, create one-stop informational hubs, and facilitate reliable Wi-Fi and broadband access. Education philanthropy must draw inspiration from their persistence and evolve to become a better racial justice partner. Otherwise, philanthropy's recent rhetoric around dismantling systemic racism will remain empty.

## **Impacts of COVID-19 on Marginalized U.S. College Students**

America's most marginalized college students (e.g., students of color, those with low incomes, post-traditional learners) have felt the brunt of COVID-19's effects. For example, an April 2020 survey revealed that 41% of college students of color would not return to campus or found it "too soon to say" due to changes in family resources. In contrast, only 24% of their White counterparts expressed the same uncertainty (SimpsonScarborough, 2020). Moreover, while nearly all colleges needed to transition from face-to-face activities to virtual platforms, impacts on students have been disparate. Auxier and Anderson (2020) found that Latinx and Black students reported higher rates of inconsistent access to the internet, buttressing a recent finding that 34% of Black and 42% of

Latinx households lack high-speed internet and, together, 33% lack personal computers (Perrin & Turner, 2019).

Concomitantly, many will continue to experience unmet basic needs (e.g., shelter, food, income) and heightened emotional distress. Brown (2020) observed that more than 45% of Black and Latinx families experienced food insecurity or the inability to pay their mortgage or rent – nearly double the share of White families. Food and housing insecurity is also pervasive among students attending Tribal Colleges: Twenty-nine percent of respondents to a 2019 survey revealed that they were homeless; 69% had faced housing insecurity at some point in the prior 12 months; and 62% had been food insecure in the prior 30 days (Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice, 2020b). These rates have increased during the pandemic (Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice, 2020a).

These challenges will make it extraordinarily difficult for many students of color to enroll in or return to college. They will also compound existing racialized and income-based disparities in student persistence and degree completion. In March 2020, the U.S. Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), providing over \$14 billion to offset financial losses experienced by postsecondary students and institutions. But student subsidies contained exclusionary provisions, such as restricting emergency aid to those who were eligible for Title IV federal student financial aid, which locked out undocumented and DACA-recipient students and many student veterans. Moreover, some scholars estimated that private, for-profit colleges received the highest per-student allocation, compounding shortfalls experienced by community colleges and Minority-Serving Institutions (Hillman, 2020).

### **Description of Questionnaire, Respondents, and Responses**

To develop a richer understanding of COVID-19's impacts on postsecondary students and organizations, a private, nonprofit philanthropic organization distributed an open-ended survey to its grantee partners. The survey sought to understand how the pandemic and associated economic uncertainty impacted its partners' work with students and how they responded to these challenges. Thirty grantees responded, including leaders of colleges and universities, organizations that provide direct college-going services to young people and adults, research firms, and policy advocacy organizations. The mission of the foundation's

education program is to increase college access and degree attainment for underserved students (e.g., Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, those from low-income backgrounds) and to support the adoption of federal, state, and institutional policies to improve their outcomes. Hence, the grantees who responded have a primary focus of serving low-income and historically marginalized students. As a result, the responses grantees provided focus on these students.

The three-question survey was disseminated at the end of March 2020 and fielded between April and May. Thus, responses did not capture perspectives on the unrest that transpired following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Nevertheless, this analysis uncovers justice-oriented themes that protesters have called for in the wake of their deaths.

### **Description of Grantees' Insights**

The survey revealed that all of the organizations reacted swiftly, protecting the health of their employees and those they served by closing offices and requiring staff to work from home, readjusting operations, and finding ways to continue serving their communities. All reported canceling or rescheduling in-person events and travel. These adjustments allowed respondents to survive the pandemic's initial disruptions, keeping them in contact with students and staff. However, several ( $n = 11$ ) disclosed budget concerns because a large portion of their funds are usually raised through in-person convenings, conferences, and fundraising events.

Most direct service providers reported that the pandemic magnified existing race- and income-based inequities in food insecurity, mental health concerns, economic constraints, loss of income, and transportation and housing needs ( $n = 15$ ). Unsurprisingly, many reported that lack of technology and bandwidth was the most immediate need for their students ( $n = 11$ ). They also reported a lack of funds to return home after colleges closed, and healthcare and childcare needs. Grantees also worried about student attrition and decreasing rates of FAFSA completion, fearing current students would not return and large numbers of high school seniors would decide not to enroll ( $n = 8$ ).

Grantees developed innovative solutions to address students' most pressing challenges. They redirected existing resources toward emergency aid to cover students' basic needs and loss of income ( $n = 5$ ). Policy organizations readjusted their focus to advocate for students by meeting

with federal and state policymakers to maximize stimulus funding and direct it toward covering students' basic needs ( $n = 6$ ). Others built COVID-19 virtual hubs with information related to mental health, student loans, standardized testing, and college admissions ( $n = 10$ ). Leveraging strategic partnerships, grantees developed collaborations to secure funding and resources for students and designed strategies to jointly advocate for students' needs ( $n = 7$ ). All respondents reported increasing their use of online platforms as they shifted to providing virtual services, including telehealth, webinars, meeting with legislators online, and hosting virtual campus tours.

Responses provided a glimpse of students' COVID-19-related hurdles, but they also revealed that college access organizations and mission-oriented universities are at the forefront of responding to community needs and stewarding resources to support students. Grantees are making internal adjustments, refocusing short- and long-term goals to foster better outcomes for students, finding creative ways to continue serving them, and forming collaborations to strategically advocate for their needs. Perhaps one of the most important insights is that these organizations remain committed to serving vulnerable populations historically marginalized by racism, unjust policies, and government disinvestment. Grantees rapidly responded to students' obstacles even when facing their own challenges, including organizational budget constraints, caring for children and family members at home, and shortcomings in technology.

### **Steps Philanthropy Can take to Support Racial Equity in Higher Education**

Given disparities in student experiences and outcomes, we see these innovations as a part of a greater movement to eliminate educational inequities. Even when organizations operate with limited resources and staff capacity, they have been able to disrupt norms and step outside their comfort zones to meet the needs of vulnerable communities. As philanthropists, we need to reimagine ourselves outside the constraints of bureaucratic red tape; we cannot remain on the benches and watch as the pandemic destroys the progress these organizations helped accomplish. At the onset of the pandemic, many foundations offered flexible grant terms and targeted funding to support racial equity, but philanthropy needs to commit to these efforts, sustaining these approaches over time. Education inequities are longstanding; one-time fixes will do little to reverse them.

We have the responsibility to disrupt inequitable and unjust systems and ensure that all students can reach their full potential. We assume this with deep respect for students' humanity, and a profound understanding that we can only achieve these ends in partnership with our grantees. We are inspired by the ways our grantee partners have adapted under the current conditions. This moment deepens our commitment to working toward equity and justice in education and beyond, and to helping our grantees build stronger futures for the students they serve.

As foundations, we need to explicitly name racial injustice in our writing, public remarks, and whenever we observe it. We will share our power and privilege by amplifying the voices of scholars and education leaders who pursue its eradication and attack its driving forces. Additionally, we will refine the ways we learn from the field, expanding our network of informants and storytellers and becoming more attentive to organizations that serve communities of color. We will continue this journey and welcome other funders to also consider strengthening their relationships with postsecondary education.

## References

- Auxier, B., & Anderson, M. (2020). *As schools close due to the coronavirus, some U.S. students face a digital 'homework gap'*. Pew Research Center, Fact Tank. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/16/as-schools-close-due-to-the-coronavirus-some-u-s-students-face-a-digital-homework-gap/>
- Brown, S. (May 6, 2020). *How COVID-19 is affecting Black and Latino families' employment and financial wellbeing*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-covid19-affecting-black-and-latino-families-employment-and-financial-well-being>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). Hospitalization rates and characteristics of patients hospitalized with laboratory-confirmed coronavirus disease 2019 — COVID-NET, 14 states, March 1–30, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69(15). <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6915e3.htm>
- Hillman, N. (2020). *CARES Act Funding Allocations*. University of Wisconsin Student Success Through Applied Research. Retrieved on August 28, 2020 from: <https://sstar.wisc.edu/cares-act/>
- Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice (2020a). *New evidence on basic needs insecurity and student wellbeing*. Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice. <https://hope4college.com/wp->

- content/uploads/2020/06/HopeCenter\_RealCollegeDuringthePandemic.pdf
- Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice (2020b). *Tribal colleges and universities #RealCollege Survey*. Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice. [https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2019\\_TribalCollegesUniversities\\_Report.pdf](https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2019_TribalCollegesUniversities_Report.pdf)
- Johnson, G. (May 26, 2020). COVID-19's assault on Black and Brown communities. *Penn Today*. <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/covid-19s-assault-black-and-brown-communities>
- Maxwell, C., & Solomon, D. (2020). *The economic fallout of the coronavirus for people of color*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2020/04/14/483125/economic-fallout-coronavirus-people-color/>
- Perrin, A., & Turner, E. (2019). *Smartphones help blacks, Hispanics bridge some – but not all – digital gaps with whites*. Pew Research Center, Fact Tank. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/20/smartphones-help-blacks-hispanics-bridge-some-but-not-all-digital-gaps-with-whites/>
- Sanyaolu, A., Okorie, C., Marinkovic, A., Patidar, R., Younis, K., Desai, P., Hosein, Z., Pada, I., Mangat, J., & Altar, M. (2020). Comorbidity and its impact on patients with COVID-19. *SN Comprehensive Clinical Medicine*, 2, 1069-1076. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42399-020-00363-4>
- SimpsonScarborough. (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on higher education: National student survey, pt. III*. SimpsonScarborough., Retrieved on August 29, 2020 from: <https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4254080/SimpsonScarborough%20National%20Student%20Survey%20.pdf>
-

**Authors Bio**

JOSELIN E. CISNEROS, MA, is an Education Fellow at The Kresge Foundation. Her research and programming interests lie in the area of improving higher education opportunities for students with indigenous, Latinx, Black, Asian, low-income and undocumented backgrounds. Email: [jecisneros@kresge.org](mailto:jecisneros@kresge.org).

EDWARD J. SMITH, PhD, is a Program Officer at The Kresge Foundation and an instructor at the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University. His grantmaking focuses on improving postsecondary education opportunity and his research focuses on city-based financial aid programs. Email: [ejsmith@kresge.org](mailto:ejsmith@kresge.org)