

# Higher Education Policy in a COVID World

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COVID-19 is massively disrupting large segments of our economy and society. Higher education is not immune to these disruptions. In the spring, it meant facing the herculean task of shifting instruction and operations remotely in the middle of a semester. With the public health crisis entering its third season, higher education faces the challenge of continuing its current education mission while grappling with what the future might hold in a “post-COVID” world. Questions, challenges, threats, and opportunities that existed before the pandemic are being exacerbated and accelerated in this “new normal.” This includes questioning the value-proposition of higher education and its role in social mobility and workforce development. These questions are exponentially magnified when framed by an instructional modality that is largely remote, a public health crisis felt disproportionately by communities of color, substantial restrictions on international students and scholars, and unemployment at a level higher than during the Great Recession.

Federal higher education policy over the last ten years has experienced significant shifts, reflecting, albeit imperfectly, changes impacting institutions of higher education (IHEs). One example, the makeup of students over time has changed dramatically. In 2010, 63 percent of college students were white, in 2018, this number dropped to 55 percent (going back further, in 2000, 71% of students were white). A growing number of students are not traditional “first-time, full-time 18 year-olds.” Enrollment at IHEs of students 25 to 34 years old increased 35 percent between 2001 and 2015 and is projected to increase 11 percent between 2015 and 2026. At the same time, the number of high school graduates is expected to contract, “The nation is projected to produce fewer high school graduates in all of the 10 graduating classes between 2014 and 2023, compared to the highest recorded number of graduates in 2013.” As a result, policymakers are pushing proposals that reflect these changing demographics and increasing scrutiny of completion rates and outcomes. As an example, the most recent Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization to be approved by the House education committee included provisions that would measure how well institutions serve low-income students and would incentivize raising completion rates.

Higher education’s regulatory and oversight environment is littered with issues that could be implemented completely differently overnight. Title IX regulations, as an example, have experienced a veritable 180-degree shift over the last several years and could face more change under a new Administration. The effort to repeal the tax on endowments has not only been stymied, but additional scrutiny has been raised by Congress on the diversity of endowment managers and whether institutions with large endowments should receive COVID-relief aid. Calls for greater accountability which were primarily focused on for-profit career schools now extends to non-profit institutions and their relationships with online program management providers and institutions seeking to expand their online presence.

Political and social conversations about higher education also seem to be becoming more strident. Alongside conversations about “free-college,” is the politicization of free speech on campuses. The current Department of Education claims, “Too many institutions value their own prestige, selectivity, and the academic status quo more highly than reducing costs, serving high need students, and increasing efficiencies.” To this cauldron of changing demographics and policy pressures, higher education is beset by challenges to funding streams (particularly for state-supported publics); growing competition (and restrictive policies) for international students and scholars; technological innovations and disruptions that may force a reality and not just a conversation on “life-long learning” and “distance learning,” and growing awareness of the need to support the mental health of students and staff, among a bevy of other challenges.

## Policy Issues

### Digital Learning & Teaching Infrastructure



### Equity



### International Talent



### Workforce Development & Lifelong Learning



### Funding



### Mental Health



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The November 2020 election will be a significant factor in how these policy areas are addressed. The Potential Policy Proposals highlighted below can be incorporated into an institution's or organization's strategic policy platform or advocacy agenda. These proposals can serve as a starting point for crafting federal engagement strategies with congressional and agency policymakers.

## Policy Issue      Current State

### Digital Learning & Teaching Infrastructure

The predominance of remote instruction was supposed to be temporary. Now it's likely going to be the reality for the 2020-2021 academic year. While the initial focus was on logistics, the question now must center on the details of high-quality teaching, learning, and research in remote and digital environments.

The realities and demands of the 21st century are accelerating the need to consider digital learning, not as an after-thought or better left to the MOOCs and behemoth online institutions.

This reality is here to stay even after a vaccine is developed.

## Potential Policy Proposals

- Eliminating the digital divide and investments in equitable broadband access is essential to ensuring equal access
- Direct ED and NSF to elevate investments in researching, developing, supporting, and disseminating best practices as it relates to high-quality digital teaching, learning, and research
- Prepare teachers, faculty, and students to be conversant and adept in digital learning and research environments
- Launch a new "ARPA-ED" or embrace novel educational testbeds to understand the intersection of technology and educational cohorts (e.g. special education in an era of remote learning)

Investments in infrastructure must include investments in broadband. Legislation supporting investments and attention to educational technology, supporting virtual work-based learning and research experiences, and creating "teaching labs" where teaching and learning best practices can be developed for both K12 and postsecondary is essential to recovering from COVID and beyond.

### Equity

Higher education has been challenged about meeting its mission of "engine of social mobility" and the pandemic is exacerbating inequities. Numerous reports highlight how many IHEs do not reflect the socio-economic makeup of the U.S. Growing calls to address systemic racism will require the education and research enterprise to embrace equity and address and rectify disparities.

- Increase financial support for MSIs
- Invigorate teacher preparation and social impact interventions efforts at IHEs
- Direct federal research agencies to incentivize relationships and partnerships between MSIs and non-MSIs and additional funding considerations for distressed communities

These policy proposals could be advanced in reauthorization bills and increasing funding for existing programs (e.g. HEA Titles II, III, and V, NSF EHR and SBE programs, HHS social welfare efforts, etc.)

### International Talent

The Trump Administration's executive actions and international affairs have created a difficult environment for international talent. OPT, H-1B, and other foreign talent programs have been hampered, making the U.S. less attractive for the best and the brightest. Moreover, reduced fees collected may hamper the consular official

- Consider proactive efforts to attract and retain international talent
- Ease the pathway towards permanent residency for international students, particularly those who can support the innovation ecosystem

system for years to come. Meanwhile, support for federal oversight and enforcement around science and security will continue to be a bipartisan issue.

Immigration reform is hard but necessary. Leveraging the support for immigration from industry and connecting talent to U.S. leadership will be critical in any effort at comprehensive (or even piecemeal) reform.

## Workforce Development & Life-long Learning

COVID is likely to accelerate calls for an education and training system that is responsive to the future of work. COVID-19 and technological disruptions are leading to an even greater need for higher education to ensure students are equipped for a labor market that demands an ever-evolving skillset. Many large corporations are making investments in internal training and there is no shortage of “bootcamps” and other entities claiming that the BA is no longer the key to unlocking the door to a career.

- Modernize the Federal-Work Study program
- Increase support and incentives for work-based learning models like cooperative education and apprenticeships
- Create Individual Training Accounts for displaced workers, incumbent workers in need of upskilling, individuals interested in reskilling, and support true life-long learning

HEA, WIOA, stimulus packages, and tax reform all offer potential avenues for enacting these policy proposals.

## Funding

Institutions are facing bleak fiscal environments. These include cuts in state aid, loss of auxiliary revenue, enrollment pressures, etc. COVID-relief efforts will provide temporary support, but long-term challenges remain.

- Double the Pell Grant
- Recognize the changing demographics of students and increase support for wrap-around services (childcare, transportation, nutrition, etc.)
- Improve regulatory clarity for alternative financing mechanism like Income Share Agreements
- Multi-year relief payments from Congress

Many of these efforts will require special one-time adjustments from Congress and/or a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. HEA reauthorization has been on Congress’s to-do list since 2013. If Democrats control the Administration and the Senate, it could be the catalyst needed to move an HEA.

## Mental Health

The mental health needs of students and staff were high on the list of concerns of many university presidents before the pandemic. Forced social isolation and distancing has only exacerbated the issue. IHEs need support to address the needs of their own communities, but through research capacity and mental health workforce programs, have an obligation to address the mental and behavioral health needs of society writ large.

- Increase funding for mental health supports on campus
- Increase funding for mental health professions (like social work) education and training programs to address the growing maelstrom of suicide, substance use, and depression facing our society
- Ensure regulatory structures support the ability to provide support for individuals, families, and communities.
- Push for greater mental health access through telehealth

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Updates to regulations, reauthorizations of health professions legislation, and increased support and funding at federal agencies like HHS, HRSA, and SAMHSA for IHEs are potential steps to address the mental health needs of students, staff, and individuals.

Speaking to The Chronicle of Higher Education, Morehouse College president Dr. David Thomas commenting on higher education policy during COVID, “We can’t count on the public policy environment to reinforce or guide our decision making... I’ve never seen an environment like this for higher ed. This is uncharted territory.” In many ways, COVID has served as an accelerant to the many policy fires facing higher education. There are glimmers of hope, however. The inclusion of higher education in COVID relief packages was not a foregone conclusion. A change in Administration may bring a different perspective on the importance of higher education (in addition to new regulatory challenges). The potential policy proposals outlined here offer higher education institutions and organizations potential planks to consider incorporating into their policy strategies and platforms.

While the policy issues above are likely to face continued attention no matter the outcome of the election in November, some are likely to see increased or decreased priority or focus depending on the outcome.

## Second Term Trump Administration

### Continued Focus

International Talent



### Increased Priority

Digital Learning  
& Teaching  
Infrastructure



Workforce  
Development & Lifelong  
Learning



### Decreased Priority

Equity



Funding



Mental Health



## Biden Administration

### Continued Focus

Workforce  
Development & Lifelong  
Learning



### Increased Priority

Digital Learning  
& Teaching  
Infrastructure

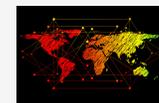


Equity



### Decreased Priority

International Talent



A Biden Administration is likely to decrease the prioritization of new regulations that limit international talent.

Funding



Mental Health

