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Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP)  
“COVID-19: Going Back to College Safely”  
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Good morning, Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray and Members of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify at today’s hearing, “COVID-19: Going Back to College Safely.” I appreciate the opportunity to share my views on one of the most important and challenging decisions higher education has ever faced — how to return students, faculty, staff and researchers to campus as soon as it is safe to do so, while continuing to provide excellent educational opportunities to our students.

I am the president of Brown University, an institution located in Providence, Rhode Island. When our country grappled with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic earlier this year, institutions of higher education, including Brown, took swift action and were among the first to cease on-site operations. The rapid response that occurred across the country stemmed from our concern for the health of our students, employees and surrounding communities, and our recognition that college campuses pose special challenges for addressing infectious disease.

Thus, when the time comes for colleges and universities to reopen, we must do so safely and in accordance with the advice of public health experts. I recognize that there is no one roadmap for reopening a campus. Colleges and universities vary widely in terms of their financial resources, sizes, access to health care, and the level of COVID-19 infection in their locations. However, I firmly believe we share common priorities and principles that guide planning for reopening our campuses.

First and foremost, 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. I’ll address all of these points in this testimony.

First, it is important to understand that the mode of how we deliver the educational experience next year will very likely look different than in past years. It is imperative that colleges large and small — urban and rural — have the resources to ground our actions supporting teaching and instruction in evidence-based public health protocols for safeguarding the health and well-being of our communities.

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.

Additionally, even if most students return to campus, institutions will also need to provide remote education for students who are unable to return because of travel restrictions or health conditions.

Putting these elements in place will require an extraordinary effort, and will create additional financial pressure on colleges and universities. Institutions will be required to innovate as they never have before. But in my view, if this is what it takes to safely reopen our campuses, and provided that students’ privacy is scrupulously protected, it is worthwhile. Institutions need to be supported in their efforts to safely handle the possibility of infection on campus while maintaining the continuity of core academic functions.

This path to reopening college campuses requires close coordination with state and local public health officials, not only to protect students and employees, but also the local community members they interact with. At Brown, we are planning for a gradual return to campus over the summer — starting with the reopening of research laboratories — that aligns with plans recently announced by Governor Gina Raimondo for the reopening of businesses and industries across Rhode Island. Even though coordination between the leaders of our nation’s 4,000 degree-granting postsecondary institutions and state and local governments will vary, especially given the differences in approaches to reopening, it is imperative that we all work together to maintain the health of our communities as we plan for a range of different scenarios for the coming year.

It is important to underscore once again that college campuses should only reopen if it is safe to do so and in accordance with the advice of public health experts. Should there be a resurgence in infection as the U.S. economy reopens, it may not be possible to bring students back to campus in the fall. As many institutions move forward with resuming mission-critical campus and research operations over the summer, we must remain vigilant and be prepared to slow or halt efforts to reopen.

The challenges institutions of higher education face as we develop plans to safely reopen colleges and universities this fall are immense. This planning is necessary for two reasons: institutions provide essential educational and learning opportunities to millions of students every year; and they make significant contributions to our local communities as well as the national economy.

Last fall, over 19 million students were enrolled at an American college or university to obtain some form of advanced learning or training. If students cannot come back to campus, and if schools do not take steps to ensure students have access to excellent educational opportunities, some students may forgo starting college or delay completing their degrees. This would have a damaging effect on our country, especially given the role higher education plays in preparing young people to become productive and effective members of democratic societies.

And as a sector, higher education is a significant component of the U.S. economy. Degree-granting postsecondary institutions employ about 3 million people, and as recently as the 2017-18 school year contributed more than \$600 billion of spending to the national gross domestic product. Colleges and universities have traditionally served as anchor institutions and have been some of the most stable employers and consumers of goods and services in municipalities and states. Our missions of education and research drive innovation, advance technology and support economic development. Educational attainment, including college and graduate education, enables upward mobility and is an essential contributor to the improvement of living standards in the United States and around the world.

If colleges and universities can reopen safely, they will have to contend with the costs of implementing the comprehensive public health plans described earlier in this testimony. In addition, they can expect their students to require significantly more financial aid. This is especially true for those campuses that have fewer resources to begin with and are more subject to state budget cuts. In a May 29, 2020, letter, the American Council on Education and other associations estimated that higher education will require \$46.6 billion to address near-term financial needs, including need-based aid for students and costs incurred due to campus closures. This figure does not include additional costs for reopening in the fall, such as testing, tracing and isolation. Additional assistance should go directly to institutions. (For more detailed information please see the attached letter on institutional and student financial relief needs from the American Council on Education:

<https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Letter-Senate-fifth-supplemental-request-052920.pdf>)

Using my own institution as one example, consider that after the 2008 financial crisis, Brown had to increase scholarships by 12% to meet the full financial need of all enrolled undergraduates. Given that the unemployment rate in May is expected to be about 20%, more than double the maximum during the Great Recession, we anticipate that our students' financial needs will increase much more than in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Many schools cannot afford to increase scholarships to meet this need. Without additional federal support for financial aid, many of their students may be unable to return to college for financial reasons, even if their campuses are open.

Furthermore, it is important to note that international students and scholars are integral to our institutions. American colleges and universities attract the best and brightest students from around the world. To ensure that international students can continue to study safely in the United States, it is essential that the resumption of visa processing occurs swiftly and international students receive expedited visas. Additionally, it is critical that students and exchange visitors receive clear guidance as soon as possible on any additional requirements they will have to comply with in order to enter the country, including testing and quarantine requirements.

In the event that it is not safe to reopen college campuses, many institutions of higher education will need relief and support from the federal government in order to survive, especially those that were in precarious financial positions before the pandemic. Already, the financial impact of the pandemic on institutions of higher education is staggering and continues to climb. Using Brown as an example once again, we expect a negative financial impact next fiscal year from COVID-19 on the order of \$100 to \$200 million or more, depending on forecasted losses and increased expenses associated with different scenarios for reopening.

While we have implemented a strict freeze on hiring and salary increases for faculty and staff — and senior leaders have taken pay cuts — we continue to feel deep budget impacts of important measures that include supporting undergraduate students with travel, moving and instructional expenses; crediting fees for room and board; waiving the summer earning expectations of all undergraduate students and providing more scholarship aid; providing support to graduate students; and contending with loss of revenue from cancelling summer programs.

Colleges and universities across the country are experiencing similar losses. Most are heavily dependent on tuition, and so remaining closed in the fall means losing as much as half of an institution's annual revenue. If this happens, it is expected that a number of institutions will be forced to permanently close. This would be a devastating loss for students, lead to a fresh wave of layoffs, and harm local economies and our country as a whole.

Although most of the discussion around the reopening of college campuses has focused on students, it is important to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic has halted a significant amount of the federally funded research that takes place at research institutions. Restarting this research must also be a priority.

Over the past several months, universities have kept open laboratories that conduct research related to COVID-19. It is likely that one of America's leading research institutions will contribute to the discovery of a vaccine for COVID-19. Research universities are also working to identify effective treatments and better testing methods. This is urgent and necessary work, and it has been gratifying to see how university-based scientists across the country have stepped up to help end the pandemic.

In the meantime, however, an extraordinary amount of federally funded research is languishing on the bench due to this pandemic. This includes research in areas such as combatting Alzheimer's disease and cancer, and the development of sustainable energy sources. Putting this work on hold not only threatens the future of research and discovery, but also the country's position as the world's leader in innovation.

Our research institutions need urgent relief to preserve research and lab infrastructure as well as to protect our research workforce — both of which are needed to emerge intact from this crisis. The federal government can provide assistance in a number of ways, including but not limited to, additional support for major research agencies; uniform guidance and policies from federal agencies to provide flexibility to cover salaries, benefits and tuition support for graduate students and researchers; and temporary regulatory and audit flexibility from the Office of Management and Budget during the pandemic. (For more detailed information, please see the attached May 27, 2020, letter on research relief recommendations from the Association of American Universities, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, Association of American Medical Colleges, and American Council on Education: <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Letter-Senate-Research-Relief-052720.pdf>)

Unlike single-sector businesses and organizations in other industries, institutions of higher education engage in every sector of the critical infrastructure necessary to our communities. Universities operate hospitals and medical centers, full-service utility companies, transportation services, and telecommunications and computing networks. We provide housing and food services; run daycares, gyms, stadiums, libraries, performance venues and museums. In doing so, we employ hundreds of thousands of workers in various trades and professions. In other words, unlike most single-sector businesses, we must determine how to address safety concerns across *multiple* operational settings.

Therefore, efforts at providing relief and support should recognize the unique role of higher education institutions to serve and support a broad and complex population of students, faculty and staff, and do so in as safe a manner as possible. I recognize that the needs of students and employees are extraordinary, but a full post-pandemic recovery requires a response that's equally unprecedented.

In the coming months, we will learn how health conditions evolve as the U.S. economy begins to reopen, and how quickly innovations in testing, contact tracing and treatment occur. Institutions will evaluate these factors in order to make fully informed decisions on reopening

that are in the best interests of the health of our respective communities and our country. I remain cautiously optimistic that campuses can reopen in some capacity in the fall. As I wrote in my piece in *The New York Times*, our duty now is to marshal the resources and expertise to make it possible to reopen our campuses safely. We are reliant on partnerships with government to make that happen as soon as possible.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony for this important hearing. I want to express my appreciation to the Chairman, Ranking Member and the rest of the HELP Committee for convening this forum to discuss an issue that is so important to the future of higher education, our students and our country.